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TRISTAN CORBIÈRE AND THE POETICS OF IRONY

Katherine Lunn-Rockliffe

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Introduction

This study of Tristan Corbière's poetry aims to show how his innovative use of irony contributed to the general revolution in poetic language that marked the 1870s. Corbière's idiosyncratic blend of oral diction, quotation, and self-contradiction is often overlooked in mainstream literary histories, but it is at the root of what Edmund Wilson calls the 'conversational-ironic' branch of Symbolism,[1] influencing Laforgue in the 1880s, and Pound and Eliot in the twentieth century. This tradition is often overshadowed by the parallel current of 'serious-aesthetic' poetry exemplified by Mallarmé,[2] but irony can create effects as oblique and indeterminate as the more rarefied forms of 'pure poetry'. Like his contemporaries such as Rimbaud, who are so often classed as Symbolists, Corbière is strictly speaking a precursor of the Symbolist movement proper. His single published volume, *Les Amours jaunes*, appeared in 1873, well before the movement gathered force in the 1880s, and was written in isolation from other originators. He is often seen as the archetypal *poète maudit*, a misunderstood outsider in revolt against conventions, and his brief but colourful life certainly fuels this myth. However, his originality lies in the way he subverts the clichés of the *poète maudit* and inscribes marginality in the very language of his verse, which Huysmans describes as 'à peine français'.[3]

Irony lies at the heart of Corbière's aesthetic of defamiliarization and operates at all levels from verbal wit to cosmic pessimism. During the nineteenth century, irony emerged as a hallmark of modernity, and in the process became far more than a mere trope. In its many guises it remains a defining feature of Western culture, so Corbière's use of irony to explore the spiritual void and the crisis-ridden subject still seems profoundly modern at the start of the twenty-first century. He nonetheless continues to perplex readers, bearing out Ezra

[1] Edmund Wilson, *Axel's Castle* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1948), 96.
[2] Ibid. [3] J.-K. Huysmans, *À rebours*, Folio (Paris: Gallimard, 1977), 306.

Pound's assertion that 'the ironist is one who suggests that the reader should think'.[4] Corbière's writing systematically opposes the normal recuperative strategies used by readers, and thus raises questions about the function of irony and how one should read poetry. There is a wealth of theoretical tools now available to tackle the ambiguities of both irony and poetry, but the two things tend to be seen as mutually exclusive. Philippe Hamon has called for the relationship between poetry and irony to be debated in more precise terms, noting that lyric is a genre and irony a 'posture d'énonciation',[5] and underlining that irony has been an important ingredient in lyric poetry ever since Baudelaire.[6] This book pinpoints the workings of Corbière's particular blend of the lyric and the ironic, and outlines a method of reading such verse. Rather than explaining Corbière's incongruities as the expression of a troubled subjectivity, it takes the difficulty posed by irony as a starting point and shows how he uses it to manipulate the reader.

Corbière's poetry represents a challenge to the literary competence of readers. It problematizes representation and violates normal syntax in ways which can seem reckless. His prosodic freedom and anti-intellectual force have fuelled charges of amateurism, and critics have shied away from a poet who did not theorize outside his verse; Corbière left no aesthetic manifesto or 'Lettre du voyant' to shed light on his aims.[7] However, the lack of explanatory material has not deterred subsequent poets, and Corbière is very much a poet's poet, admired by Modernists and Surrealists alike. Indeed, the story of his critical reception overlaps with that of his influence on later poets, particularly in the Anglo-Saxon world. Having been championed by Pound and Eliot, he continues to influence poets working in English, who are frequently drawn to translate his verse.[8]

[4] Ezra Pound, *Make it New: Essays by Ezra Pound* (London: Faber, 1934), 171.

[5] Philippe Hamon, 'Sujet lyrique et ironie', in *Le Sujet lyrique en question*, ed. Dominique Rabaté, Joëlle de Sermet, and Yves Vadé (Presses Universitaires de Bordeaux, 1996), 19–25 (19).

[6] Ibid. 25.

[7] Few letters from his adulthood have survived.

[8] One of Eliot's early poems is a sonnet in French entitled 'Tristan Corbière', included in T. S. Eliot, *Inventions of the March Hare: Poems 1909–1917*, ed. Christopher Ricks (London: Faber, 1996), 88. For translations of Corbière, see Val Warner, *The Centenary Corbière: Poems and Prose of Tristan Corbière* (Cheadle Hulme: Carcanet, 1974); Christopher Pilling, *These Jaundiced Loves: A Translation of Tristan Corbière's 'Les Amours jaunes'* (Calstock: Peterloo Poets, 1995); Peter Dale, *Wry-Blue Loves: Les Amours jaunes and Other Poems* (London: Anvil, 2005). Translations of Corbière poems are also included in Robin Skelton, *The Dark Window* (Oxford University Press, 1962).

Despite this posthumous appreciation, his work passed almost unnoticed in his own lifetime, he was not part of a poetic coterie, and had little social contact with other writers. Contemporary readers appear to have been baffled by *Les Amours jaunes*; the only three reviews known to have appeared at the time of its publication all struggle with its strangeness, originality, realism, and disregard for prosodic rules. These reviewers all query the sincerity of the work. One reads it as a direct expression of its author, but remarks that if it were after all contrived it would be a 'tour de force'.[9] Another argues that 'la franchise est poussée jusqu'à la rudesse' as the author mocks everything but that the humour conceals tragedy.[10] The third concludes that Corbière could not have believed in any of what he had written, and that the book is 'un plaidoyer contre les exagérations de l'école moderne'.[11] All of these concerns are still relevant, as are remarks on the discomfort of the reading experience; the second reviewer confesses 'nos yeux ont lu plus d'un passage qui n'a rien dit à notre intelligence' and the third declares 'je sors de la lecture des *Amours jaunes* le cerveau affreusement fatigué'.

Apart from these perplexed responses, *Les Amours jaunes* was overlooked during its author's lifetime and only rescued from oblivion ten years after its original publication, when Verlaine included Corbière in his sketches of *Poètes maudits*, alongside Mallarmé and Rimbaud.[12] Verlaine's comments influenced subsequent reception of Corbière, and his distinction between the Paris and Brittany poems established a dichotomy which has preoccupied critics ever since. Even more astute commentary was provided by Laforgue, whose notes on Corbière offer valuable insights into the poetic techniques of his predecessor.[13] Laforgue's own poetry was influenced by Corbière, and a heated debate about this debt was sparked by the publication of *Les Complaintes*. It was claimed that Laforgue had in these dissonant poems merely 'poussé

[9] '*Les Amours jaunes*', *La Renaissance artistique et littéraire*, 2/38 (26 Oct. 1873), 304. Repr. in Francis F. Burch, *Sur Tristan Corbière* (Paris: Nizet, 1975), 96–9.

[10] M. de Vaucelle, 'Chronique', *L'Artiste* (1 Nov. 1873). Reproduced in Jean-Louis Debauve, 'Autour de la publication des *Amours jaunes*', *La Nouvelle Tour de feu*, 11–13 (1985), 55–77 (70–2).

[11] Anon., '*Les Amours jaunes*, par Tristan Corbière', *L'Art universel* (1 Nov. 1873). Reproduced in Debauve, 'Autour de la publication des *Amours jaunes*', 72–6.

[12] Paul Verlaine, *Les Poètes maudits*, in *Œuvres en prose complètes*, ed. Jacques Borel, Pléiade (Paris: Gallimard, 1972), 633–43.

[13] Jules Laforgue, 'Une étude sur Corbière', *Entretiens politiques et littéraires*, 2/16 (July 1891), 2–13 (7).

jusqu'à l'extravagance le procédé de l'auteur des *Amours jaunes*',[14] but Laforgue retorted that he had only read Verlaine's article after writing *Les Complaintes*, and underlined the differences between Corbière and himself: 'Corbière a du chic et j'ai de l'humour; Corbière papillotte et je ronronne; je vis d'une philosophie absolue et non de tics.'[15] However, Laforgue's own notes on Corbière are perceptive, and offer a useful starting point for a study of his language. A later generation of admirers included Eliot and Pound, who both acknowledged Corbière's influence on their own work and whose comments on his poetry offer useful insights. Not only did these early commentaries ensure that Corbière was not forgotten, but their emphasis on formal aspects is a valuable complement to the biographical flavour of many early responses. These relied heavily on René Martineau's anecdotal account of Corbière's short life, a tantalizing concoction of anguish and rebellious pranks which has acquired the status of myth.[16]

In recent years, Corbière's reputation as an amateurish iconoclast has been eclipsed by the recognition of his innovative craft. In publishing the first major critical work devoted to Corbière, Sonnenfeld put questions about structure, psychology, tradition, and innovation on the critical agenda, and over the last three decades the formal dimension has come under closer scrutiny.[17] Whereas Sonnenfeld still emphasized Corbière's spontaneity, Angelet's valuable survey of stylistic innovations established that the poetry is carefully crafted 'dépoétisation' moving towards a 'poésie nouvelle'.[18] Pauline Newman-Gordon's analysis of the psychology of painful laughter opened up the question of irony as an aesthetic strategy, and made way for studies of the mask.[19] MacFarlane's substantial study of the poetic persona brings out the fictionality of this self-representation,[20] and Marshall Lindsay's sensitive

[14] L.-G. Mostrailles (pseudonym for Léon Epinette and Georges Rall), 'Les Quais de demain', *Lutèce*, 4 (9–16 Aug. 1885), 2. Repr. in Burch, *Sur Tristan Corbière*, 106–9.

[15] Jules Laforgue, 'Lettre', *Lutèce*, 4 (4–11 Oct. 1885. Repr. in Burch, *Sur Tristan Corbière*), 150–1.

[16] René Martineau, *Tristan Corbière* (Paris: Le Divan, 1925).

[17] Albert Sonnenfeld, *L'Œuvre poétique de Tristan Corbière* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1960).

[18] Christian Angelet, *La Poétique de Tristan Corbière* (Brussels: Palais des Académies, 1961). Michel Dansel uses a similar taxonomy to emphasize Corbière's modernity in *Langage et Modernité chez Corbière* (Paris: Nizet, 1974).

[19] Pauline Newman-Gordon, *Corbière, Laforgue, Apollinaire ou le rire en pleurs* (Paris: Nouvelles Éditions Debresse, 1964).

[20] Keith H. Macfarlane, *Tristan Corbière dans 'Les Amours jaunes'* (Paris: Minard, 1974).

analysis shows how his poses do not conceal a unified subject but reveal its multiformity.[21] Robert Mitchell presents Corbière as a master-joker in an accessible account of the way his playful rhetoric expresses serious themes.[22] Jean-Marie Gleize argues for a metapoetic reading, seeing *Les Amours jaunes* as a rigorously crafted exploration of the poet's condition which reveals the impossibility of communication.[23] Serge Meitinger shows how poems range from straight denunciation of Romanticism to a complete breakdown of conventional form.[24] Elisabeth Aragon's excellent analysis of Corbière's polyphony sketches the potential value of considering it in Bakhtinian terms.[25] Hugues Laroche suggests that the narrator gradually disappears in the course of the volume, as the impasse of personal lyricism gives way to a proliferation of speakers in the Brittany poems, and emphasizes the ultimate drive towards silence.[26]

Whereas earlier critics tended to regard Corbière's dislocation as an involuntary attempt to resolve a problem of personal identity, recent ones have viewed it as an expression of artistic sterility or failure of language itself. This study aims to explain rather how the striking expressive force is an effect resulting from the self-conscious use of language. It shows how the contradictions work as performance and process, rather than anchoring them in either the author's biography or in critical notions of impersonality. It integrates semiotic approaches, Bakhtinian dialogism, and Anglo-American methodologies in order to suggest a way of reading Corbière. The clutch of poems not included in *Les Amours jaunes* are taken into account,[27] but examples are mainly drawn from the volume as originally published. Particular emphasis is given to a neglected part of his output: the 'Rondels pour après'. Reading with attention to ironic nuance reveals the sophistication of these poems, and thus alters the way one views the corpus as a whole.

[21] Marshall Lindsay, *Le Temps jaune: Essais sur Corbière* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972).

[22] Robert L. Mitchell, *Tristan Corbière* (Boston: Twayne, 1979).

[23] Jean-Marie Gleize, *Poésie et figuration* (Paris: Seuil, 1983).

[24] Serge Meitinger, 'L'Ironie antiromantique de Tristan Corbière', *Littérature*, 51 (1983), 41–58.

[25] Elisabeth Aragon, 'Tristan Corbière et ses voix', in *Voix de l'écrivain: Mélanges offerts à Guy Sagnes*, ed. Jean-Louis Cabanès (Toulouse: Presses Universitaires du Mirail, 1996), 179–200.

[26] Hugues Laroche, *Tristan Corbière, ou les voix de la corbière* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de Vincennes, 1997).

[27] Collected in *OC*.

Despite the limited size of the corpus, the extreme density of Corbière's poetry demands close scrutiny. The striking thing about *Les Amours jaunes* is its difficulty, and although it is tempting to explain this as a consequence of a troubled life or as a sign of ultimate meaninglessness, it needs to be taken as the starting point for reading. It is helpful at this stage to distinguish between types of difficulty, of which George Steiner identifies four. First, 'contingent' difficulties are lexical and 'aim to be looked up'.[28] Corbière certainly requires diligence in this respect, and, whilst the annotations in Aragon and Bonnin's edition are an invaluable source of references,[29] scouring dictionaries and reference books has proved to illuminate still more of the baffling jokes. I have identified additional intertextual references and collected lexical information which throws light on the poems (particularly for the 'Rondels pour après'). Steiner's second kind of difficulty, which he terms 'modal', arises when the reader is faced with texts of an alien sensibility and cannot judge their taste and seriousness.[30] Corbière anticipates the twentieth century in both his radical doubt and his colloquial style, and has himself influenced modernist authors, so this is less of a hurdle. Any difficulty in judging his seriousness arises as much from his extensive use of Steiner's third kind of difficulty, termed 'tactical', created by an author choosing to be obscure, to 'deepen our apprehension by dislocating and goading to new life the supine energies of word and grammar'.[31] These three classes of difficulty all arise within a 'contract of ultimate or preponderant intelligibility between poet and reader', but a fourth class, of 'ontological' difficulty, occurs when this contract is itself broken. It questions the nature of human speech and the status of significance.[32] Recent readings have tended to emphasize this aspect at the expense of the others, and 'nothing' becomes a final term in which to ground all the uncertainties. However, the difficulty of Corbière's poetry is very much a process, and constantly forces the reader to look at things afresh, with every poem establishing a new set of bearings.

Irony is the guiding term of this study, considered at all levels from verbal trope to view of the world. In Corbière's hands irony is not just a tool of negation but an oblique way of saying many things at once. Ambiguity certainly poses a challenge to the contract between poet and

[28] George Steiner, *On Difficulty and Other Essays* (Oxford University Press, 1978), 40.
[29] *Les Amours jaunes*, ed. Elisabeth Aragon and Claude Bonnin (Toulouse: Presses Universitaires du Mirail, 1992).
[30] Steiner, *On Difficulty*, 29. [31] Ibid. 40. [32] Ibid. 40–1.

reader but, far from just questioning the possibility of communication, it invites us to view open-endedness as an affirmative liberation. Although focusing on the slippery concept of irony is a risky enterprise, it is the best way to examine the nuts and bolts of Corbière's language. Theories of irony by critics as diverse as Mikhail Bakhtin, Vladimir Jankélévitch, Wayne Booth, and Philippe Hamon all illuminate his self-conscious writing. Bakhtin's attention to polyphony is particularly useful, since Corbière's irony is closely linked to a lively use of quotation and a strong sense of a speaking voice. Although Bakhtin was analysing prose novels, his view is appropriate to Corbière's particular citational brand of poetry.[33] It also emphasizes parallels with novelistic techniques such as dialogue, quotation, and indirect discourse. Lilian Furst, who examines these techniques closely, points out that the rise of the novel was 'conducive to the blossoming of irony'.[34] However, irony also feeds extensively into poetry. John Porter Houston suggests that Corbière's poetry, like that of Rimbaud and Laforgue, uses techniques being developed by novelists,[35] and the parallels with prose fiction need to be explored in more detail. It is significant that the work identified by Gustave Kahn as coming closest to *Les Amours jaunes*, in its depiction of a subject striving to 's'inscrire lui-même en notations précises sans se couvrir de philosophie ni de symbole',[36] is Rimbaud's *Une saison en enfer* (which also dates from 1873) and which uses polyphonic prose. The Rimbaud text has been illuminated by readings which disentangle the multiple voices,[37] and since this sort of approach has also proved fruitful in readings of Laforgue, something similar is necessary for Corbière.[38] To show how Corbière's irony operates within a specifically lyric context,

[33] Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, ed. and trans. Caryl Emerson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).

[34] Lilian R. Furst, *Fictions of Romantic Irony in European Narrative, 1760–1857* (London: Macmillan, 1984), 44.

[35] John Porter Houston, *French Symbolism and the Modernist Movement: A Study of Poetic Structures* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1980), 59.

[36] Gustave Kahn, 'Tristan Corbière', *La Nouvelle Revue*, 29 (15 July 1904), 271–7 (275).

[37] See Margaret Davies, *'Une saison en enfer' d'Arthur Rimbaud: Analyse du texte*, Archives des lettres modernes, 155 (Paris: Minard, 1975); Yoshikazu Nakaji, *Combat spirituel ou immense déraison? Essai d'analyse textuelle d''Une saison en enfer'* (Paris: Corti, 1987); Danielle Bandelier, *Se dire et se taire. L'écriture d''Une saison en enfer' d'Arthur Rimbaud* (Neuchâtel: La Baconnière, 1988).

[38] See Anne Holmes, *Jules Laforgue and Poetic Innovation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993) and Jean-Pierre Bertrand, *Les Complaintes de Jules Laforgue: Ironie et désenchantement* (Paris: Klincksieck, 1997).

I draw on Bakhtin's insights in conjunction with theories of poetry, such as the semiotic approach of Riffaterre, which brings out the non-mimetic quality of Corbière's language. The kind of close reading undertaken by Anglo-American poetry critics such as Christopher Ricks and William Empson stands as exemplary practice for the reader determined to home in on ambiguities, and is particularly valuable for a poet who has always fascinated speakers of English.

There are a number of reasons why the book does not fall into neat self-contained chapters. A structure based purely on chronology is ruled out by the difficulty of dating poems exactly, even if we have a general understanding of the genesis. Furthermore, critics have always made much of the contrast between poems set in Paris and those set in Brittany, but similar techniques are used in both, and I look at the interconnections as well as the differences. A purely thematic structure is inappropriate, since the interest of the material lies in the way style is used to problematize subject matter. There is a temptation to control this unsettling material by classifying it, and there are a number of studies which usefully catalogue fields such as literary and religious influences, geographical locations, and animals.[39] However, since Corbière's irony involves the manipulation of relationships—between words, subjects, and values—he makes it difficult for us to seize on positive terms. His poetry evades classification and subverts conventional categories, so it seems imperative to avoid reducing it to a taxonomy, and to trace instead the way it makes readers explore gaps. Because I am analysing discontinuities, it would defeat the object to base chapters on artificial categories. Instead, each chapter pinpoints a realm of experience and explores an associated set of formal features.

While such dense poetry demands close attention to detail, I have tried to steer between the two extremes of, on the one hand, listing quantities of microscopic examples taken out of context, and, on the other hand, merely presenting a series of close readings. The danger of the first system is that by reducing the verse to a list of devices one loses any sense of poems as whole structures, and the danger of the second is that one loses a sense of the parallels and interconnections

[39] Analysed respectively in Francis F. Burch, *Tristan Corbière: L'originalité des 'Amours jaunes' et leur influence sur T. S. Eliot* (Paris: Nizet, 1970); Michel Dansel, *Tristan Corbière: Thématique de l'inspiration* (Lausanne: L'Âge d'Homme, 1985); Fabienne Le Chanu, 'Tristan Corbière: Le bestiaire corbiérien des *Amours jaunes*', doctoral thesis, University of Rennes II, 1993.

between disparate texts. Each chapter therefore tackles a particular set of problems across a selection of thematically linked poems, and, because each poem is so different from all the others, selected examples are examined in some detail. Reading Corbière presents a particular challenge, because each poem creates its own terms, forcing the reader to evaluate each speaker and assess that speaker's perspective. This makes it difficult to sum up Corbière's aesthetic without overgeneralizing or making him sound more like Baudelaire than he really is. Laforgue's notes, despite containing the comment that Corbière contains 'pas la moindre trace [. . .] de *Baudelairien*',[40] sound remarkably similar to his notes on Baudelaire, which perhaps tells us more about the later poet's own preoccupations than anything else. However, although many of Corbière's general structures and themes resemble Baudelaire's, the texture of his language is very different, and it is through close reading that his originality can be most clearly demonstrated.

The first chapter gives an overview of *Les Amours jaunes* as a whole, and shows how Corbière's poetry challenges both the conventional codes of verse and habitual ways of reading irony. His irony is inextricably bound up with his use of literary quotations and living speech, and, in order to explore the dynamics of this relationship, I establish a conceptual framework that draws on diverse theories of irony, dialogue, and intertextuality. The first chapter establishes a set of tools for reading Corbière, and identifies the fundamental strategies which underlie his distracting rhetorical surface. Each of the remaining four chapters pinpoints a specific set of ironic strategies, and examines a group of poems which deploy them. The second chapter tackles the more representational outwardly focused Brittany poems. It focuses on descriptive techniques in these early texts to show how dialogue and polyphony developed out of observation. The third chapter focuses on self-irony in the representation of the artist's Parisian poses, exploring how Corbière stages comic personae to convey both the artist's self-division and his problematic relationship with metropolitan and artistic environments. The fourth explores how the indirect discourse of irony is used to articulate sensory experience and the inner life, particularly in the love poems, before examining how the disparity between ideas and feelings has metaphysical scope. The fifth chapter draws attention to the little-known sequence of *rondels*, which fuse the key themes of art, death, and love by combining all the different techniques already

[40] 'Une étude sur Corbière', 6.

analysed. Their irony takes the form of subtle ambiguity, and represents the culmination of Corbière's ironic aesthetic.

The book thus examines the different techniques of polyphony and irony used to distance the speaker, moving from the more straightforward to the more complex. It follows the accepted view that the order of *Les Amours jaunes* does not reflect the chronology of its composition, that the Brittany poems were written first and the *rondels* last. Therefore, after the overview given in the first chapter, the book is roughly chronological in that the second chapter deals with the earliest poems, the fifth chapter with the latest ones, and the intervening chapters with those written in between. It thus suggests that Corbière's style developed over time. Woven into this sequential structure is an account of the shifting opposition of subject and world. This line of argument leads from general accounts of subjectivity and external description in Chapters 1 and 2 respectively, to an analysis of how the artist is at odds with the world in Chapter 3. Chapters 4 and 5 then explore ways in which the interface between subject and world becomes increasingly fluid in the more visionary poems.

1

Voice-Defying Lyricism

The title of *Les Amours jaunes*, the sole volume published in Corbière's lifetime (1873), sums up the paradoxical nature of his work as a whole. 'Amours' promises a prototypical lyrical collection and alludes to noble antecedents, but the pejorative 'jaunes' immediately undercuts any expectations of harmony. Yellow literally qualifies the love as jaundiced and unhealthy, but also connotes venality and jealousy, for it could refer to coins used to purchase sexual favours, or the expression *être peint en jaune*, meaning to be cuckolded. Above all, the title gives the *rire jaune*, the bitter forced laughter of someone pretending to find something funny when it is not. This reference to ambivalent humour hints at the predominant tone of the volume as a whole, while the juxtaposition of incongruous terms encapsulates its heteroclite style.

These paradoxes make it difficult to decide what sort of a book this is. Its inscrutability is compounded by the lack of an aesthetic manifesto and the uncertainty over its genesis. The strong sense of a speaking voice and representation of a troubled subjectivity are characteristic of the lyric, understood in the Romantic sense of a direct expression of the inner self, and have tempted some commentators to see the book as an expression of the author's brief but colourful life. However, the comic personae, farcical anecdotes, self-referential manoeuvres, puns, and constant shifts in mood are humorous traits more usually found in prose, dramatic monologue, popular song, or satire. As the title *Les Amours jaunes* signals, the work is a fusion of lyric and comic elements. Its internal tensions need to be seen in the context of a widespread experimentation with such hybrid forms at the time.

THE LITERARY CONTEXT

In the course of the nineteenth century the boundary between high literature and more ephemeral humorous writings was gradually being eroded. Baudelaire's poetry represents a milestone in introducing irony into serious lyric verse, and his aesthetic of 'surnaturalisme et ironie' paved the way for the experiments of Corbière's generation.[1] Like all his contemporaries, Corbière had clearly immersed himself in *Les Fleurs du mal*, and he acknowledges his debt to Baudelaire by parodying him.[2] Corbière's verse also owes something to Banville's virtuoso use of comic rhyme in the *Odes funambulesques*. However, he was not acquainted with contemporaries such as Rimbaud, Verlaine, Germain Nouveau, and Charles Cros, and would not have known the parodic verse that they were circulating amongst themselves in the early 1870s.[3] The ironic spirit also manifests itself in published collections like Cros's *Le Coffret de santal*, which appeared in the same year as *Les Amours jaunes*. Irony was clearly very much in *l'air du temps*, and Corbière's verse exhibits many of the stylistic strategies used by his contemporaries. He was not the only one of his generation to have independently developed the poetic possibilities of irony, for Lautréamont had produced *Les Chants du Maldoror* (1869) in a similar isolation.

What unites these diverse poets in their anti-poetic experiments is that they were reacting against the Romantic view of poetry as inspiration. Corbière's most blatant irony is directed at the excesses of Romantic lyricism; poems like 'Le Fils de Lamartine et Graziella' deride its inflated rhetoric, sentimental tone, and autobiographical themes. Such antipathy to Romantic modes had long been commonplace, the shortcomings of poetry as a spontaneous expression of strong feelings had been intensely debated, and poets of all kinds were exploring more impersonal modes of writing. Baudelaire's intervention was once again pivotal in this respect; in his critical writing he attacks 'les fatalistes de l'inspiration'[4] and 'amateurs du délire',[5] and praises instead Poe's detached calculation of the elements required to produce a desired

[1] Charles Baudelaire, *Œuvres complètes*, Pléiade (Paris: Gallimard, 1976), ii. 658.

[2] 'Bonne fortune et fortune' and 'La Pipe au poète' parody Baudelaire's 'À une passante' and 'La Pipe' respectively.

[3] See the *Album zutique*.

[4] Baudelaire, *Œuvres complètes*, ii. 335.

[5] Ibid. 343.

effect.[6] Baudelaire's predilection for imagination over passion, and his careful crafting of language, enabled him to evoke emotions precisely and with ironic distance. His emphasis on creation as a controlled exploration of language influenced all the poets of the 1860s, including Mallarmé and even Verlaine, whose early essay on Baudelaire rails against 'l'Inspiration — ce tréteau'.[7]

This poetic ferment coalesced in the so-called Parnassian movement, whose emphasis on impersonal description and formal perfection still held sway at the time Corbière was writing. Its empty formalism is directly mocked in *Les Amours jaunes*, for instance 'I Sonnet avec la manière de s'en servir' ironically tells us it was written by numbers and playfully parades the stultifying effect of such verse. It was commonplace to deride the Parnassians; poems like Rimbaud's 'Ce qu'on dit au poète à propos des fleurs' mock their artificial style, and the press caricatured Parnassian poets as *impassibles* to the extent that the epithet *parnassien* itself became a term of abuse.[8] Their brand of impersonality was nonetheless an influential part of the general reaction against Romantic lyricism. Leconte de Lisle, one of the leading Parnassian poets, used the preface to his *Poèmes antiques* to sum up the impasse, as early as 1852.[9] He laments the vanity and limited scope of personal confession, and in particular the sterile efforts of new poets recycling clichés and taking up well-worn postures.

Corbière did not write any manifesto of this kind, but his ironization of Romantic and Parnassian forms is a way of participating in the debate, as noted by the contemporary critic who describes *Les Amours jaunes* as a 'plaidoyer contre les exagérations de l'école moderne'.[10] Voices of many of these other kinds of poet invade *Les Amours jaunes* and Corbière enters into dialogue with them. He exaggerates the failings of his predecessors to generate humour and to underline his own originality. However, the literary landscape was more complex than this

[6] Poe declared that 'we need severity rather than efflorescence of language. We must be simple, precise, terse. We must be cool, calm, unimpassioned. In a word, we must be in that mood which, as nearly as possible, is the exact converse of the poetical.' Edgar Allan Poe, *Complete Poems and Selected Essays*, ed. Richard Gray, Everyman Library (London: Dent, 1993), 158.

[7] 'Charles Baudelaire', in *Œuvres en prose complètes*, 599–612 (605).

[8] See Catulle Mendès, *La Légende du Parnasse contemporain* (Brussels: Brancart, 1884), 8–9.

[9] C.-M. Leconte de Lisle, 'Préface des *Poèmes Antiques*' (1852), in *Articles, Préfaces, Discours*, ed. Edgard Pich (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1971), 107–36.

[10] '*Les Amours jaunes*, par Tristan Corbière', *L'Art universel* (1 Nov. 1873).

derision might suggest. The Parnassians were a diverse crowd and by no means all anti-Romantic. Romanticism itself was far from being a monolithic entity and had from an early stage conveyed disenchantment using oblique strategies: Musset's verse is shot through with irony, Pétrus Borel makes it impossible to pin down the self, and even Hugo's extreme fluency conceals many of the discontinuities that later poets bring into the open.[11] To some extent, every writer creates his own predecessors, and Corbière singles out the Romantics as the butt of his humour and exaggerates their bombast and sentiment in order to emphasize his revolt. Similarly, Poe's attack on inspiration was an exaggeration calculated to valorize his own aesthetic, as Baudelaire acknowledges,[12] and Leconte de Lisle's attack on Romanticism was not only a poetic programme but a polemic act which raised his profile in the literary field.

Corbière's attack on his predecessors, then, is not in itself original, but the multi-layered quality of his irony is something new. By making it difficult to establish what his position is, he makes the problem of deciding what sort of poetry to write his theme, and thereby reveals the complexity of the literary landscape. Corbière's use of irony and polyphony is one way of avoiding the pitfalls of emotionalism and thus achieving impersonality. It is part of the general nineteenth-century drive towards poetic impersonality, which was to culminate in Mallarmé's 'disparition élocutoire du poète'.[13] *Les Amours jaunes* effects self-effacement by means of self-irony, in statements like 'C'est bien moi, je suis là — mais comme une rature',[14] and interpretations sensitive to modern theoretical notions of impersonality have highlighted the preoccupation with emptiness which haunts the book.[15] *Les Amours jaunes* is certainly the product of a culture haunted by a spiritual void, but rather than referring all its contradictions to a final term of silence or failure, it is necessary to analyse how the effect of self-cancellation is produced by the tension between comic and lyric forms. Before outlining a conceptual framework which offers a way of reading this hybrid poetry, I shall first consider the difficulties posed by the construction of the volume as a whole.

[11] For an analysis of Hugo's polyphony see Pierre Albouy, 'Hugo, ou le Je éclaté', *Romantisme*, 1 (1971), 53–64, and Ludmila Charles-Wurtz, *Poétique du sujet lyrique dans l'œuvre de Victor Hugo* (Paris: Champion, 1998).

[12] *Œuvres complètes*, ii. 335, 343.

[13] 'Crise de vers', Stéphane Mallarmé, *Œuvres complètes*, ed. Bertrand Marchal, Pléiade (Paris: Gallimard, 2003), ii. 211.

[14] 'Le Poete contumace', 80.

[15] See Meitinger, 'L'Ironie antiromantique de Tristan Corbière'; Laroche, *Tristan Corbière, ou les voix de la corbière*; Gleize, *Poésie et figuration*.

LES AMOURS JAUNES: THE BOOK AND ITS STRUCTURE

Lyric collections tend not to be highly structured, *Les Fleurs du mal* being the exception rather than the norm,[16] but *Les Amours jaunes* plays with its own architectural possibilities. It is divided into seven loosely thematic sections in the following order: 'Ça' reflects on the work and the poet, 'Les Amours jaunes' illustrates the fraught relations between the sexes in a series of bitter love poems, 'Sérénade des Sérénades' stages the failed communication between a serenader and the object of his attentions, 'Raccrocs' is an eclectic mix of witty anecdotes and substantial reflective poems, 'Armor' describes Corbière's native Brittany, 'Gens de mer' evokes the life of sailors, and the 'Rondels pour après' condense elements of the preceding sections into a ghostly evocation of the afterlife. It has often been pointed out that the order of these sections traces a progression from negativity towards positivity. The two poles tend to be equated with the thematic opposition between Paris, which dominates the first four sections, and Brittany, which takes up the next two. This duality has preoccupied Corbière critics ever since Verlaine noted the contrast between the 'Corbière parisien [. . .] le Dédaigneux et le Railleur de tout et de tous',[17] and the 'Breton bretonnant de la bonne manière'.[18] Verlaine himself favoured the latter, and opinion has subsequently been polarized along the lines of his antithesis. Approaches range from those claiming Corbière as a regional poet, to those championing the Parisian poems as a hotbed of technical innovation. Others construct global schemes to account for the duality; Sonnenfeld sees in *Les Amours jaunes* a moral structure contrasting the worlds of Paris and Brittany, symbols for damnation and salvation respectively.[19] He argues that Paris is criticized for isolating individuals while Brittany is idealized for its human solidarity and pervasive religion.[20] However, the geographical opposition does not account for the travel poems or the

[16] Baudelaire wrote to Vigny 'le seul éloge que je sollicite pour ce livre est qu'on reconnaisse qu'il n'est pas un pur album et qu'il a un commencement et une fin.' *Correspondance*, ed. Claude Pichois, Pléiade, 2 vols. (Paris: Gallimard, 1973), 196. Barbey d'Aurevilly famously wrote about the 'architecture secrète' of the volume. The structure was exaggerated for the purposes of Baudelaire's trial; it was argued that poems representing immorality needed to be read in the context of an overall moral design.

[17] *Les Poètes maudits*, 639. [18] Ibid. 641.

[19] *L'Œuvre poétique de Tristan Corbière*, 120. [20] Ibid. 60.

'Rondels pour après', and there is a continuity between the two principal settings. Both the urban environment with its chance encounters and the rugged Breton landscape dramatize the existential isolation of the individual. As André Breton says of the Brittany poems, 'Le dandysme baudelairien est ici transposé en pleine solitude morale, dans l'ombre de l'ossuaire de Roscoff.'[21] Just as individual lines lack a grammatical centre and poems lack a psychological centre, the work has no real geographical heartland. The yellow love of the title encompasses both the self-deprecating jealous love of women, and the affection for the 'Landes jaunes d'Armor'.[22] Even 'Armor', the Celtic name for Brittany (meaning 'by the sea'), reinforces the continuity between the two parts by echoing the consonants of *amour*.

The puzzle of the work's design is compounded by the lack of external material to illuminate its genesis.[23] The received view is that the order of the sections does not reflect the chronology of their composition.[24] 'Armor' and 'Gens de mer' are thought to have been written in Brittany between 1862 and 1871 (although mainly between 1868 and 1871), and the preceding sections after 1871, when Corbière is supposed to have fallen in love with the actress he called Marcelle, and after which he spent much of his time in Paris. The 'Rondels pour après' are thought to have been composed shortly before the publication of *Les Amours jaunes* in 1873. There is little reason to depart from this received view, which, although often associated with the contrast between Paris and Brittany, is also plausible at the level of style. The juvenilia which have survived indicate that Corbière started writing parodic verse in his lycée years.[25] The burlesque humour of a conscientious schoolboy seems to have been gradually refined into a more attenuated intertextuality, culminating in the subtle irony of the 'Rondels pour après'. However, it would be mere speculation to attempt to date the poems and recreate the process of composition.[26] The development would seem not to have

[21] André Breton, *Anthologie de l'humour noir* (Paris: Pauvert, 1966), 265.

[22] 'Cris d'aveugle', 50.

[23] Although Jean-Louis Debauve has usefully traced the circumstances and chronology of the book's publication, and discredited the myth that the frères Glady were publishers of pornography, in 'Autour de la publication des *Amours jaunes*', *La Nouvelle Tour de feu*, 57–8.

[24] Approximate dates of composition are suggested by Martineau, Le Dantec, and Sonnenfeld, and summarized by Walzer in *OC* 699.

[25] For instance, amongst the juvenilia, 'Ode aux Déperrier' is a parody of Malherbe.

[26] Some commentators have proposed such theories. In *Le Temps jaune*, Marshall Lindsay suggests that Corbière began with realism, discovered Baudelaire, but was unable

been straightforwardly linear, and the derisive style of the posthumous poems suggests that Corbière reverted to less oblique techniques after the *rondels*.[27] As each poem is so individual, it is difficult to group poems belonging to identifiable phases, and the predilection for hybrid forms suggests that Corbière experimented with different sorts of poem simultaneously, and was more interested in amalgamating categories than in perfecting specific genres. The integrity of *Les Amours jaunes* needs to be considered in the light of its genesis, for many of the poems could have been written well before any overall plan existed. Some may date from as early as 1862, although most of them were probably composed between 1869 and 1873. The book does not trace a poetic apprenticeship nor were its constituent parts written according to a pre-determined scheme. The resolutely non-chronological order suggests that the assembly of the volume was a creative act adding its own meanings.

This self-conscious structuring is underlined by the volume of framing material. Laroche's reading emphasizes the concentric symmetrical structure of the book.[28] The 'À Marcelle' preface and postface poems form the outermost layer, the introductory first section 'Ça' is mirrored by the concluding section 'Rondels pour après'. The central section 'Raccrocs' begins and ends with poems stating a philosophy of life. The key text 'Litanie du Sommeil' is at its centre, and therefore forms the kernel of the book as a whole. Indeed, the amount of framing material threatens to eclipse and even repeat the work itself, so the opposition between external frame and work within is broken down. This blurring is reinforced by the stylistic self-consciousness, since poems located at the heart of the work seem to step outside it and comment on it.

Individual sections replicate the global pattern of nested layers, as many have a circular pattern. 'Sérénade des Sérénades' begins and ends with the poet calling up at a window. 'Armor' begins with the mythical deathscape of 'Paysage mauvais' and ends with a contemporary landscape peopled with dying soldiers in 'La Pastorale de Conlie'. The early sea poems are presented as a book within a book; 'Gens de mer' has its own

to evoke transcendence, so his art is a result of a reconciliation of his own materialism with Baudelairian art, 41–3. In ch. 6 of 'Tristan Corbière: A Biographical and Critical Study' (doctoral thesis, University of Oxford, 1951), Ida Levi argues that each section of *Les Amours jaunes* belongs to a particular stage in his poetic development, and 'Raccrocs' contains poems from all periods.

[27] e.g. 'Paris diurne' and 'Paris nocturne'. These were handwritten in Corbière's personal copy of *Les Amours jaunes* and thus easier to date.

[28] *Tristan Corbière, ou les voix de la corbière*, 95–100.

preface. Even individual poems are framed with extensive peritext, boasting long titles or unwieldy epigraphs such as that of 'Épitaphe', which begins thus: 'Sauf les amoureux commençans ou finis qui veulent commencer par la fin il y a tant de choses qui finissent par le commencement que le commencement commence à finir par être la fin [. . .]'. This comic conflation of ends and beginnings is continued in a lengthy paragraph, so the epigraph threatens to engulf the poem itself. Disruption of chronology is evident at all levels of the book, from the order of the sections to the structure of individual images in which the vehicle precedes the tenor. Beginnings and endings are frequently false, as when the poem 'La Fin' rounds off a section but is far from being the end of the collection.

Linear flow is further disrupted when adjacent poems clash with each other, for each poem has a different point of view. For instance, each of the metapoetic poems in the first section 'Ça' considers *Les Amours jaunes* from a different point in time, and the book takes on a different aspect in each case. The poem 'Ça?' stages the reception of the book, with a dialogue between an interrogator struggling to define the volume and the derisive author sabotaging his attempts, whereas 'Paris' is a dialogue in which two sides of the poet argue over the pose to be struck. 'Ça?' implies that the poet reflects on the book only under duress and once it has been written, whereas 'Paris' shows the poet calculating the best tactic to ensure success. Elsewhere, 'À la douce amie' cruelly rewrites the more tender 'À ma jument souris'. In 'Féminin singulier' a woman responds violently to the stereotypes of femininity listed by the poet in 'À l'Éternel Madame'. The pair of sonnets 'Duel aux Camélias' and 'Fleur d'art' represent two very different takes on a single story. Poems in remote parts of the volume resemble each other in startling ways even if they have very different subjects. For instance, 'Pudentiane' (about religious hypocrisy) and 'La Goutte' (a description of a storm at sea) both consist of juxtaposed fragments. The book is not united by a consistent authority, but the succession of contradictory voices is itself a source of meaning. The striking use of voice is a crucial element of the style, and *Les Amours jaunes* has been shown to trace the drama of a voice finding itself. Meitinger identifies a development from despair—expressed through the abortive dialogue of love in the early sections—to freedom as the individual loses itself in the increasingly depersonalized poems towards the end.[29] Laroche

[29] Serge Meitinger, 'Tristan Corbière dans le texte: une lecture des *Amours jaunes*', doctoral thesis, Université de Haute Bretagne, 1978.

expands on this to suggest that the narrator gradually disappears in the course of the volume, the impasse of personal lyricism giving way to a proliferation of speakers in the Brittany poems.[30] This view implies that the order corresponds to an organic development of a voice, but poems throughout the volume depersonalize the subjective lyric in different ways. It is difficult to account for *Les Amours jaunes* in terms of a single abstract scheme, as the overall picture is built up from the sum of particular discontinuities. Unlike Hugo's *Les Contemplations*, the volume is not presented as embodying the self, but a picture of a fragmented psyche emerges from the accumulation of fantasies and clichés. The speaker is at times a dog, a toad, a pariah, but most often a poet or hopeless lover. The incongruous juxtaposition of disparate voices invites us to read the book as a carnivalesque succession of personae, and makes it impossible to take the persona of any individual poem seriously.

INVERTED LIFE HISTORY

The personae refract rather than reflect biographical experience, and the book is an artistic construct which bears little resemblance to the life of its author. The boundary between reality and fiction is already blurred on the title-page, for the author's own name is semi-fictional. Originally named after his father Édouard, Corbière assumed the more romantic name Tristan, replete with Celtic and literary associations. Explaining Corbière's poetry with reference to his life is easier said than done, as it is jokes all the way down; accounts are dominated by anecdotes which present him as a prankster. He is supposed to have given a bleeding sheep's heart to his aunt with the words 'Tiens, voilà mon cœur!', and when he was taken to the Maison Dubois hospital shortly before his death, he is said to have declared 'Je suis à Dubois dont on fait des cercueils'.[31]

Although the content of *Les Amours jaunes* is drawn from personal experience and the mode is confessional, it is far from being a direct

[30] *Tristan Corbière, ou les voix de la corbière. Les Amours jaunes* is thus a 'livre-tombe' reflecting the emptiness of the self (110). 'Ça' transforms life into death, 'Rondels pour après' death into life, and the main body of the work strives to situate itself between the extremes of life and death, the overall movement ultimately being one of resolution (95–6).

[31] These witticisms appealed to André Breton, who quotes them in his *Anthologie de l'humour noir*, 266–7. They were originally recounted in Martineau, *Tristan Corbière*, 49 and 79.

expression of Corbière's life. He never was a sailor or a genuinely poverty-stricken bohemian. The parodic locations and dates appended to poems (such as '*Lits divers — Une nuit de jour*', 'Litanie du Sommeil') proclaim the fictionality of the biographical framework and mock the convention of lyric poetry as a spontaneous overflow. The poems render experience in such concentrated language that it takes on an objective life of its own. As Flaubert advocates, impersonality can thus be combined with personal lyricism:

> Il faut couper court avec la queue lamartinienne et faire de l'art *impersonnel* ou bien, quand on fait du lyrisme individuel, il faut qu'il soit étrange, désordonné, tellement *intense* enfin que cela devienne une *création*. Mais quant à dire faiblement ce que tout le monde sent faiblement, non.[32]

Each poem in *Les Amours jaunes* finds a different way of defying monologic lyricism to achieve this intensity, and the book as a whole plays on biographical chronology to make that strange too. Lyric poetry parading its origins in the subject was sometimes presented in volumes structured as the account of a life, whether that of the author, as in Hugo's *Contemplations*, or that of a fictional persona, as in Sainte-Beuve's *Joseph Delorme*. However, *Les Amours jaunes* departs from the conventional life story by reversing its order. The volume begins with an 'Épitaphe', progresses through the cynicism of failed love in Paris and the existential bleakness of Brittany, to the ethereal child's afterlife of the 'Rondels pour après'. The otherworldly *rondels* transcend the biographical by blending elements of reality to evoke something beyond the confines of life itself. The disruption of conventional narrative and causality is particularly striking since it plays on one of the great literary topoi of the nineteenth century: the move from the provinces to Paris. The more harmonious Brittany is questioned by being placed after the cynical Parisian poems. Brittany is not merely revisited nostalgically but is filtered through a sophisticated consciousness. The Brittany poems find external analogues for the self rather than delving inwards, but the world is still centred on the individual. Existential questions are evoked in a personal way which avoids the clichés of world-weary Parisians. Because the Breton poems follow the openly introspective ones, the continuity of the existential themes is shown without being stated. *Les Amours jaunes* unites the love of woman and love of Brittany, both are

[32] Gustave Flaubert, *Correspondance*, ed. Jean Bruneau, Pléiade, ii (Paris: Gallimard, 1980), 555.

ambivalent love-hate relationships which reveal the subject's internal divisions. As both Paris and Brittany are treated with critical distance, the volume as a whole conveys a complex world-view.

The overarching inversion of life history intensifies individual poems, because the presentation of frenzied cynicism *before* the more serenely distanced Brittany poems allows it to colour the whole volume, and suggests that disillusionment is always already present. Corbière does not recount the loss of illusions chronologically as lived experience, which reflects the socio-cultural context of the 1870s, when *ennui* had become a received idea. As Culler points out, this was already true of Flaubert's generation: 'they begin to write at a time when they have as yet no experience to write about but know the conclusions they would reach should they trouble to reduplicate experiences.'[33] Corbière refuses to feign the innocence needed to describe the process of disillusionment as empirical history, so, instead of telling it as a story, he conveys it through the structure of the book. Positioning the Brittany poems after the Paris poems brings out ironies which might be less obvious if they were read in isolation. Disenchantment is also built into the language at the level of the phrase, which is why his poetry calls for close attention to style.

Perennial themes are explored through a stylized biography which draws attention to its own processes. Whilst regressing from disillusionment to the origins of a personal ideal which is already tarnished, *Les Amours jaunes* also echoes past eras of poetry. The positioning of poems which portray cynicism at the beginning makes irony its cornerstone. However, putting the less cynical poems last suggests the volume is structured as a drive towards the positive, as emphasized by Sonnenfeld. The work therefore pulls in two directions simultaneously, just as individual poems vacillate between alternatives rather than ever settling on one message. Disillusionment is conveyed by the ironic texture rather than by depiction of conventional poses or ready-made terms like 'spleen' or by a story. Rather than being declaimed by a single knowing voice, the latent hope only emerges indirectly across a succession of voices who are not individually aware of the general direction. Poems taken in isolation may seem to be merely incidental mockery, but the overall view is built up from a sum of particularities, and even the slighter poems contribute to the broader picture. Particular instances can be treated lightly, but a

[33] Jonathan Culler, *Flaubert: The Uses of Uncertainty* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1974), 28.

generalized seriousness underlies the local mockeries, which bears out Jankélévitch's observation that for the ironist 'chaque moment, pris à part, est futile et ne mérite qu'une attention amusée, mais la totalité des moments successifs résiste à notre humour.'[34]

Although the dominant tone of the work is that of disenchantment, structurally it inverts the chronological representation of loss of illusion, by moving from poems of Parisian artifice to poems praising the elemental Breton sailors. However, the praise in the latter is attenuated, partly as the reader encounters them only after the most cynical poems, and partly as the Breton world is filtered through a sophisticated cosmopolitan consciousness. The volume is neither symmetrical nor a linear progression, but sets up a pattern of juxtapositions and parallels, jumping backwards and forwards, and creating a Chinese box effect through its ironic framing. The structure of *Les Amours jaunes* reflects the vacillation between the positive and the negative which is constantly displayed at the microcosmic level, so an investigation of the linguistic texture must be combined with an awareness of the interrelations between different poems. The structure of the volume reflects that of individual poems, proceeding by alternation of opposites, reflexivity, and circularity, and is thus inextricably linked with the question of the style.

FRAMING POEMS

If *Les Amours jaunes* resembles a Chinese box, its outermost layer is constituted by the two 'À Marcelle' poems. The volume opens with 'Le Poète et la Cigale', and concludes with the parallel 'La Cigale et le Poète'. These book-end poems occupy a key position: the interface between the literary text and the real world, and they explore the relationship between the poet and his audience. The two poems thematize their role as beginning and ending, by evoking inspiration and reception respectively. The opening poem does not present itself as a preface to a conventional collection, mediating between book and world, or establishing a relationship between author and reader.[35] The author

[34] Vladimir Jankélévitch, *L'Ironie* (Paris, Flammarion, 1964), 24.

[35] A fragment of a preface entitled 'Parade' was handwritten in Corbière's personal copy of *Les Amours jaunes*. Walzer suggests it was abandoned before the volume was published or only written afterwards, *OC* 914–15. It is a patchwork of phrases used in other poems, and parodies the conventions of the preface with phrases like 'Va mon livre & ne | me reviendra plus.'

adopts an anonymous voice and retreats behind a comic dialogue between Marcelle and the poet, so it is hard to tell how close he is to this poet. Although dedicated to Marcelle, the poem does not address her directly, but is in the third person. Furthermore, the poem is a rewriting of La Fontaine's 'La Cigale et la fourmi', so the speaker is in more than one way a ventriloquist. This parody is simultaneously an act of self-abasement, an acknowledgement of tradition, and a rebellion against the classic. Corbière's attitude to his own father's literary achievements is similarly double-edged. Édouard Corbière senior was a prolific and successful writer of sea adventure novels, notably *Le Négrier* and *Les Pilotes de L'Iroise*.[36] The son dedicates *Les Amours jaunes* to his father with the words 'À l'auteur du *Négrier*', which are modelled on the formula 'par l'auteur de', identified by Genette as a device whereby an author promotes a new book by reminding buyers of an earlier success.[37] Corbière is trading on his father's reputation and acknowledging that he is dwarfed by it, but also simultaneously rivalling it and presenting his own book as a challenge. *Les Amours jaunes* is thus located in both cultural and personal space.

In the La Fontaine fable, a cicada who has spent the summer singing rather than gathering food finds herself ill-prepared for the onset of winter and begs the industrious and well-prepared ant to give her food. Corbière transposes the moral tale to a stylized bohemian setting, with the poet borrowing his muse's name to use as a rhyme. As the original text opens the *Fables*, it has introductory as well as metapoetic associations, and is one of the best known. The Corbière poem wittily revolves around the conceit of borrowing a rhyme, whilst borrowing its rhymes from 'La Cigale et la fourmi'. The irreverence in itself was not original, as it was a commonplace in the nineteenth century to rework the fables, particularly this one. As the *Fables* were firmly lodged in the minds of nineteenth-century readers, being an educational staple used to initiate children into culture, this poem has an immediate familiarity. Corbière uses a reassuringly recognizable text to introduce a defiantly unclassifiable book. He does not attack the original poem, which was itself ambivalent rather than moralistic, but uses it to suggest further layers of meaning. He echoes La Fontaine in

[36] The maritime novel was a genre made popular by Eugène Sue.

[37] Gérard Genette, *Seuils* (Paris: Seuil, 1987), 45. The juxtaposition of 'jaunes' in the title with 'Négrier' in the dedication introduces a chromatic opposition of black and yellow into the family drama.

combining sophistication and naivety, and, whilst remaining close to the original syntax, does not stop at a superficial updating of content. The cicada is an ancient emblem for the poet, although its connotations in the nineteenth century were mixed.[38] The La Fontaine fable is relevant to the practical problems of nineteenth-century poets no longer being able to live by their pen. One might expect the ant to be the bourgeois enemy (a stereotypical figure which haunts *Les Amours jaunes*), and the cicada a nightingale singing in the dark (the idea of song as frivolous practice reflects the moral judgement of a bourgeois audience for whom work was the cardinal virtue). This stereotypical opposition certainly hovers in the background, but the literal sense of the poem distorts the scheme still further by using the cicada to represent the woman Marcelle. The poet thus assumes the role of the ant, emphasizing that his poetry is crafted work rather than carefree lyrics. In the wake of Baudelaire, poets increasingly privileged effort over spontaneity, interiorizing the bourgeois work ethic in order to fabricate difficult works, with the result that literature became an autonomous practice which in turn alienated the bourgeoisie. Corbière plays on the duality of the La Fontaine text to suggest the historical changes in the poet's role which led to the gulf between poet and audience. The poem hesitates between presenting writing as a business transaction and as disinterested art.

'À Marcelle' establishes at the outset that the book cannot be read in terms of biography; the first two lines thoroughly confuse the relationship between the author, the speaker, and the poet character:

> *Un poète ayant rimé,*
> *IMPRIMÉ* (1–2)

If the speaker is literally designating a poet who has already published prior to this volume, he is setting up a persona far removed from the biographical reality of the unknown author Corbière launching

[38] Illustrators often depicted the cicada as a female street singer, as shown by Kirsten H. Powell in *Fables in Frames: La Fontaine and Visual Culture in Nineteenth-Century France* (New York: Peter Lang, 1997). 'Cigale' was also understood as a metaphor for such itinerants, as in Hugo's *Notre-Dame de Paris* (in *Romans*, ed. H. Guillemin (Paris: Seuil, 1963), i. 263). *Cigale* is used by Zola and the Goncourts as little more than an emblem of waif-like femininity, connotations which are present in the 'À Marcelle' poems. *Cigale* also acquired the negative sense of a bad poet and is even further debased when used as slang for a gold coin.

his first collection. Although Corbière explores questions of fame and recognition in subsequent poems, it borders on insolence to open on this note. However, the capitalization indicates that the incongruity is deliberate and exaggerated, and questions the poet's having published, or at the very least mocks his inflated pride at having done so. Furthermore, as the poet is a parodic version of the author of *Les Amours jaunes*, '*IMPRIMÉ*' could refer to this very book. It verges on the tautological to refer to the poet's being in print when he quite visibly is on that very page, and the typography conveys glee at what can be done with the medium of print itself. The work opens on a note of revelry, by rejoicing at its own existence. Corbière's flaunting of his achievement is understandable, given that this was his first venture into print. However, the capitalization also exaggerates and ironizes the feat rather than merely voicing it presumptuously. As the poem goes on, it becomes clear that the initial emphasis on print is a chronological distortion; the triumph of being published precedes inspiration. Printed poems here precede rather than represent oral utterance, so the poem points out its own artifice both as a story of the volume's origin, and as an introduction to something that has already been written but the reader has not yet begun. The different stages of creation of the book are co-present in the final work, rather than the product being polished to disguise its fabrication. The poem refers to lyrical song but is itself far from being such a performance; song is embedded in the text as just one of many voices.

Corbière refuses to let his prefatory poem represent an episode from the real world, although the backstage atmosphere nods to social reality. However, this realism rehashes the cliché of the poor but licentious modern poet. The imaginary beginning purports to be naturalistic by presenting the poetry as something thrown together out of the raw material of life, but this spontaneity is clearly an artifice, as the rhymes are dictated by the La Fontaine text. Furthermore, the text ironically fuses a number of existing myths of poetic inspiration. The revered female figure of inspiration is debased by the sordid scene and by being doubled, for it is uncertain whether the poet is inspired by the Muse or by Marcelle. The opposition of abstract ideal and real woman is undercut, for the Muse becomes an exploited sordid figure, and Marcelle is elevated to some sort of oracle. The poem's function as preface to the completed volume suggests it is a late composition, although it presents itself as a schoolboy parody of a classic set text.

Rather than asserting the superiority of mature publication to juvenile derision, Corbière combines the two in a suggestive parody. The poet is neither just pretending to be famous (which would be juvenile), nor merely mocking his own naive excitement at being in print for the first time (which would be mature), but expressing both possibilities simultaneously in a construction which is naive in the double-voiced utterance '*Un poète ayant rimé | IMPRIMÉ*'.

The final poem, 'La Cigale et le Poète', follows the same rhetorical pattern as the first, but its *mise-en-abyme* of the finished book and anticipation of its reception comes closer to a conventional preface, blurring beginnings and endings. It also blurs the clear-cut opposition between praise and blame which John Porter Houston identifies in the Romantic lyric.[39] Marcelle embodies the possible response of a philistine public by criticizing *Les Amours jaunes*. Instead of praising and thanking Marcelle, the poem attacks her lack of taste. However, although the poet-persona is threatened by her criticisms, these are not to be taken at face value by the reader. The oblique presentation implies that the ideal reader of *Les Amours jaunes* would be more perceptive than Marcelle or the unappreciative audience she represents. The addressee jeering at the poet parodically reflects the public's incomprehension of the marginalized poet, and is an ironic version of what Abastado calls 'le mythe du Poète': poets suffering material hardship as a result of social change elevated their isolation to a noble martyrdom, and paraded their art as disinterested and autonomous.[40] Although Corbière himself never risked starvation in his bohemian garret, his poetry reflects the contradictions of the poet's socio-historic position, rather than sublimating it into nostalgia for an ideal. *Les Amours jaunes* is punctuated with references to the association of poetry and money. 'Le Poète et la Cigale' had borrowed the financial imagery of the La Fontaine text to make an optimistic connection between poetry and money; in effect promising to repay Marcelle for the loan of her name by giving her the resultant poems. The manuscript version of 'La Cigale et le Poète' used a further financial joke to demonstrate that the book is far from being a repayment; the poet returns to Marcelle to ask another favour, this time money to bribe a publisher:

[39] *French Symbolism and the Modernist Movement*, 9. Musset had already blurred this distinction in poems like 'À Julie'.

[40] Claude Abastado, *Mythes et rituels de l'écriture* (Brussels: Complexe, 1979).

Il alla montrer sa mine
A la ci-devant Voisine
La priant de lui prêter
Quelque sous pour acheter
Un acheteur à son livre. (7–11)[41]

This reflects the material production of *Les Amours jaunes*, published at the expense of the author, who was himself financially supported by his father. The final version of the poem expresses the difficulty of the poet's position more subtly through the dialogue itself. Rather than failing to be a repayment because it requires more outlay to get it into a marketable form, it fails because Marcelle does not appreciate it as a book:

Il alla coller sa mine
Aux carreaux de sa voisine,
Pour lui peindre ses regrets
D'avoir fait — Oh : pas exprès! —
Son honteux monstre de livre!…
— «Mais: vous étiez donc bien ivre?
— Ivre de vous!… Est-ce mal?
— Écrivain public banal! (7–14)

She mocks the poet, by likening him to an 'écrivain public', which literally denotes someone who makes his living by writing for illiterate clients. Marcelle may be using the term accusingly, but it aptly suggests the poet's ventriloquy in *Les Amours jaunes*, in which irony frequently involves communicating via other people's discourses and writing down feelings that the speaker hardly seems to recognize as his own. Marcelle is also reproaching him for writing up their private affairs for money. This is obviously a genuine fear on the part of an anti-Romantic poet, for, whilst acknowledging the cursed position of the poet struggling to make a living from his work, Corbière consistently mocks the Romantics for making money by exposing their personal sentiment, and he experiments with alternative means of representing personal torment without prostituting the self. Here, a private conversation is overheard rather than inflated into a rhetorical performance. The sordidly personal is a contrived fiction too, and although it is a commonplace to allow the audience to overhear an intimate exchange between poet and muse, here the public is challenged rather than edified or entertained. Marcelle describes the book as monstrous but does so in the language of a

[41] The manuscript of this version is in the Bibliothèque Municipale de Morlaix. The lines which differ from the published version are transcribed in *OC* 1366.

horrified bourgeois, which is itself undercut. Her insults are juxtaposed with the poet's attempts to defend himself. He humbly agrees that he might just as well have simply told her that he loved her and saved himself the bother of writing this book, but that '*on n'est pas parfait*'. His admission sounds like a quoted commonplace more than principled honesty and Marcelle detects the artifice:

> *— Oh! c'est tout comme, dit-elle,*
> *Si vous chantiez, maintenant!»* (19–20)

This suggests that she can discriminate between sincere and insincere speech, yet her assumption that a moralizing comment constitutes poetry seems to confirm her lack of artistic discernment. However, her very words are richly suggestive, for she is playing on the self-deprecating expression 'c'est comme si je chantais', meaning that one's efforts are useless. Voicing the idiom in the second instead of the usual first person, she sarcastically suggests that no one listens to his poetry. Whether or not Marcelle is aware of her witticism becomes irrelevant when one reads the poem as a writerly texture rather than as a dialogue between two characters. Neither speaker holds the whole truth, and the author is everywhere present but nowhere pronouncing.

These framing poems play on and add to the complexity of the volume rather than providing an explanatory *mode d'emploi* for it. They give the reader an indication of the uncertainties in store, and exacerbate the difficulties by not providing signposting to guide the reader through them. They reflect the ambiguous cultural status of a volume of poetry in the 1870s, uncertain of its place in a world where poetry is marginalized. These things are conveyed to us by a number of stylistic devices: disparities between what the reader sees and what the characters in the poem see, juxtaposition of incongruous items, double-voicing, and quotation. These all make considerable demands on the reader, and are all forms of irony. To understand Corbière's particular usage of these strategies, it is helpful to consider exactly what is meant by irony, a protean concept which is notoriously difficult to define. Theoretical work on irony often classifies it into types, ranging from microcosmic wit to macrocosmic philosophy, but Corbière defeats such orderly hierarchies.

OXYMORON, WORDPLAY, AND MASKS

Irony has classically been a rhetorical trope, involving a discrepancy between what is said and what is meant. Wayne Booth calls this

traditional verbal irony 'stable covert irony'; it causes the reader to reject a literal meaning because of 'either some incongruity among the words or between the words and something else that he knows.'[42] The author offers us an invitation to reconstruct a hidden meaning which is univocal once uncovered. Victims are never the implied author or reader, as reader and author stand securely together at the end.[43] Corbière rarely permits such stability, as illustrated by his mock 'Épitaphe' which uses a series of jokes in an attempt to define a contradictory self: 'un arlequin-ragoût, | mélange adultère de tout' (6–7). Convoluted expressions such as 'gâchant bien le mal, mal le bien' (33) cannot easily be unravelled to restore a univocal meaning. Whereas the lyric synthesizes opposites at a transcendent level, Corbière highlights comic disparities. The poet is described using paradoxes such as 'Très mâle… et quelquefois très *fille*' (31) and 'Un drôle sérieux, — pas drôle' (22). Double meanings are often exploited, as in:

> L'esprit à sec et la tête ivre,
> Fini, mais ne sachant finir. (55–6)

The various connotations of the adjective 'fini' are activated in this context: it has the positive meaning of 'polished' and the negative meaning 'has-been' (of a performer). It is also used as an intensifier to describe a liar or drunk. Elsewhere he plays on homonyms with different meanings:

> Brave, et souvent, par peur du plat,
> Mettant ses deux pieds dans le plat. (36–7)

For fear of being pedestrian in the figurative realm of platitudes, the poet makes a literally pedestrian gaffe. The speaker is ostensibly mocking the poet, but his language insinuates admiration of his wit: 'Prenant pour un trait le mot *très*' (28) implies that the poet is a foolish listener who confuses two words which sound the same, but the speaker is also making a clever joke, as 'trait' can mean a flash of wit. Corbière's poems present themselves as the work of an anti-poet, an 'Artiste sans art' (20), representing him as a hapless buffoon, and using slang or grating sound patterns to undercut expectations of eloquence, but this superficial clumsiness is coupled with technical ingenuity. Elsewhere he dismantles set phrases, drawing attention to the absurdity of the literal

[42] Wayne C. Booth, *A Rhetoric of Irony* (University of Chicago Press, 1974), 10.
[43] Ibid. 235.

meaning of their constituent components, or replacing these parts with incongruous new elements, as in 'Du *je-ne-sais-quoi*. — Mais ne sachant où' (8).

Such lines fuse two contradictory perspectives, and neither is the whole truth, which probably lies somewhere between the two. Furthermore, the point of view implied by any single line is invariably undercut by the context, so no line can be read alone. Corbière presents things from conflicting points of view without deciding between them. We do not know where the irony is asking us to stand, so this is impossible to read as stable, but comes closer to what Booth terms unstable irony, in which

> the author [. . .] refuses to declare himself, however subtly, *for* any stable proposition, even the opposite of whatever proposition his irony vigorously denies. The only sure affirmation is that negation that begins all ironic play: '*this* affirmation must be rejected,' leaving the possibility, and in infinite ironies the clear implication, that since the universe (or at least the universe of discourse) is inherently absurd, all statements are subject to ironic undermining. No statement can really 'mean what it says'.[44]

As Linda Hutcheon emphasizes, ironic meaning is constituted 'not necessarily only by an *either/or* substitution of opposites but involves *both* the said *and* the unsaid working together to create something new'.[45] Corbière makes it impossible for any given line to be taken seriously as they are self-defeating, and each statement is discredited by the next.

One way of trying to recuperate these instabilities is with the idea of a contradictory persona. A popular metaphor for irony is that of seeing behind a mask or a 'persona'. Corbière tends to be read as hiding inner suffering beneath a ludic surface, a mask of laughter. Statements like 'je ris… parce que ça me fait un peu mal'[46] are often interpreted as an invitation to forage behind the jokes, to read his poetry as ironic statements that can be reversed to expose the tears of a true lyric poet. This approach is symptomatic of a tendency to explain his contradictory style by referring to biographical reality, a view descended from Romanticism. It is the Romantics who appropriated the carnivalesque mask and made it into a façade concealing something, as Bakhtin recounts: 'the mask is torn away from the oneness of the folk carnival concept' and

[44] Booth, *A Rhetoric of Irony*, 240–1.

[45] Linda Hutcheon, *Irony's Edge: The Theory and Politics of Irony* (London: Routledge, 1994), 63.

[46] 'Le Poète contumace', 164.

now 'hides something, keeps a secret, deceives'.[47] He argues that this mutation is part of the general transformation of wholehearted laughter into irony, of the carnival spirit into subjective idealistic philosophy. This led to the topos of the sad clown, in which the festive figure masks inner tragedy or nobility. The ludic surface of *Les Amours jaunes* appears to conceal not so much nobility as a post-Romantic inner void. The loss of belief and values is explicitly verbalized in 'Épitaphe': 'Ne croyant à rien, croyant tout' (46). However, the sad clown effect is not only a result of an opposition between superficial comedy and tragic depth, but the division is played out on the surface. The subject is presented as a montage of comically contradictory elements. Irony is no longer a trope hiding the truth, but ironic texture shows a plurality of contradictory selves co-present in utterances. Irony is no longer a punctual device used to ornament oratory, but consists of many markers permeating the whole discourse, including carnivalesque reversal of high and low, oxymorons, discrepancy between form and content, asserting things by stating their opposite, contradictions, changes of register, metalinguistic fragments, periphrases, quotations, italics, exaggerations, literalizations, repetitions, and puns.

This colourful rhetorical surface produces a sense of a highly individualized witty persona. The ironic jester is an alternative to the Romantic declaimer, equally forceful but less sentimental. But the poetic voice of Corbière's poems is rarely simply that of an ironist overtly attacking a clearly defined target. It is not that he simply replaces the traditional *je lyrique* with an ironist. The subject is itself undercut, as can be seen in the puns which encrust the surface. They hesitate between two meanings which are often incongruously opposed. For instance, 'mal aimé' inverts the cliché 'bien aimé',[48] but permits it to linger as a remembered ideal against which the reality of being unloved is measured. Similarly, the line 'Bitor regardait ça — comment on fait la joie —'[49] telescopes 'faire l'amour' with 'filles de joie'. It mocks aspirations to ideal love by reducing them to sordid reality, but again they persist as a remembered ideal. The vigour of 'joie' contrasts the energy of low life with the artificial refinements of poetry, so it is not easy to decide what is positive and what is negative. The poet descends further into the gutter when he declares, 'Je parle sous moi', which likens the act of uttering poetry

[47] Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World*, trans. Helene Iswolsky (Cambridge, MA: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1968), 40.
[48] 'Femme', 1. [49] 'Le Bossu Bitor', 165.

to excretion, as the expression is modelled on the scatological 'faire sous lui'.[50] Corbière invokes the grotesque physical body with disgust rather than with glee, as in 'Bohème de chic', where the bohemian cocks his leg and parades his virility. However, as Stallybrass and White argue, disgust is a bourgeois internalization of the carnivalesque, and bourgeois disdain for the 'low' is haunted by fascination for all that is 'dirty, repulsive, noisy, contaminating'.[51] The poet uses bourgeois judgements to mock himself, but thereby mocks the bourgeois for being prudish. He attacks himself using the prudish values of the society which rejects him, recapturing a certain vitality by using his body to *épater le bourgeois*.

Puns not only divide the self, but also present stories from two perspectives simultaneously, as in 'À la mémoire de Zulma', a parody of a world-weary voice recalling youthful love:

> Elle était riche de vingt ans,
> Moi j'étais jeune de vingt francs,
> Et nous fîmes bourse commune,
> Placée, à fonds perdu, dans une
> Infidèle nuit de printemps…
>
> La lune a fait un trou dedans,
> Rond comme un écu de cinq francs,
> Par où passa notre fortune:
> Vingt ans! vingt francs!… et puis la lune! (1–9)

The Romantic quest for ideal love is here described using colloquial idiomatic expressions, so the sentimental theme is not attacked directly, but undermined by double meanings which present it from two points of view. The disparity between ideal and reality is folded into the texture as the poem mixes the codes of love and money, as though the linguistic accident were responsible for their entanglement. Using financial terminology to describe an emotional investment is a way of undercutting feeling and simultaneously attacking the all-pervasive capital. 'À fonds perdu' is a financial analogy for the girl's infidelity—he made an investment which was not returned. The speaker blames the clichéd moon with 'La lune a fait un trou dedans', which telescopes a number of idioms: 'amant de la lune' is a timid lover, 'lune' is slang for a coin, 'il y a des Lunes' is a long time ago, 'faire un trou dans la caisse' is to spend money, 'faire un trou à la lune' is to disappear and

[50] 'Rapsodie du sourd', 43.

[51] See Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (London: Methuen, 1986), 191.

leave debts, 'faire un trou à la lune avec quelqu'un' is to run off with someone, and 'voir la lune' is to lose one's virginity. The expression juxtaposes the Romantic cliché of the moon hanging in the sky with a very literal hole, a bodily orifice. The language makes a mockery of the quest for love, and the multiple meanings convey more complexity than could be expressed in a self-absorbed lament.

The self-conscious wit of poems like 'À la mémoire de Zulma' constantly rebounds on the poet himself, making it difficult to identify a conventional lyric subject. 'Épitaphe' describes the elusive subject in the third person with paradoxical statements such as:

> Ne fut *quelqu'un*, ni quelque chose
> Son naturel était la *pose*. (42–3)

Poems like 'À la mémoire de Zulma' turn this into a first person performance by systematically destabilizing the *je lyrique*. Speakers sometimes actively use puns as self-punishment, but wordplay also exposes things which are beyond the speaker's control. The double-edged language of the witty persona undercuts itself, and such speakers become the object as well as the subject of irony.

A CONTRADICTORY WORLD: PLAYING WITH IDEAS

Corbière's puns and masks make it difficult to pin down the subjects of his poems, who often seem to be alienated from themselves. This alienation is a manifestation of the spiritual void which haunts *Les Amours jaunes*, and which is often seen as so-called 'cosmic irony'. Corbière juggles playfully with words denoting abstract ideas in phrases like 'Coureur d'idéal, — sans idée'.[52] However, it is difficult to identify a coherent world-view from such anti-intellectual verse. Laforgue, who interpreted Corbière in the light of his own more philosophical sensibility, saw that the relentless antitheses were underpinned by a fundamental sense of disorientation:

> D'ailleurs tous ces gongorismes d'antithèse ne sont pas un jeu en l'air — il y a des racines — C'est l'homme qui déclare son amour et qui est dépité si on l'écoute. L'enfant gâté qui ne sait ce qu'il veut refuse sa soupe parce qu'on la

[52] 'Épitaphe', 15.

lui prêche et pleurniche dès qu'on la lui enlève. Qui fuit la société et se lamente qu'on le laisse seul. Au fond ce sentiment incurable de la déroute de l'absolu et du libre arbitre et de la logique que [Hegel] a soufflé partout.[53]

There are instances when the 'déroute de l'absolu' is articulated openly in *Les Amours jaunes*, and this is a specifically modern incarnation of irony. There has been a shift over time from seeing irony as a limited classical trope to treating it as a view of the world; the device has become content. Sometimes statements are ironic only 'because they *assert* an irony in things or events that the speaker has observed and wants to share'.[54] Wayne Booth differentiates these statements from traditional rhetorical irony, stable covert irony, because they require no act of reconstitution, and terms them stable overt irony.[55] When such irony does not stop at local observation but makes claims about the infinite, it verges on a philosophical vision. Unstable irony gives rise to a more extreme expression of doubt: everything is questioned when the act of recognizing contingency and relativity is itself undercut by irony. The ironist does not observe the chaos from on high, but is caught up in the midst of it and tormented by an awareness that attempts to step outside of it are futile.

'Paria' is the poem which most nearly presents the speaker as a philosophical seer using infinite irony, both stable and unstable, to thematize explicitly the loss of ideals. The resigned numbness of this voice contrasts with the more strident tone of other poems. The poem enacts the ironic state in geographical space, bearing out Jankélévitch's view that ironists are like vagabonds: 'Partout exilé [. . .] l'ironiste ne trouve jamais où se fixer, où planter sa tente: c'est un apatride ou, comme disait Novalis, un citoyen du monde.'[56] The speaker of 'Paria' actively rejects a whole clutch of nineteenth-century clichés: 'Qu'ils se payent des républiques, | Hommes libres! — carcan au cou —' (1–2) attacks discourses of progress, '— L'idéal à moi: c'est un songe | Creux; mon horizon — l'imprévu —' (21–2) attacks the ideal. The poem sets the speaker up as an anti-hero who condemns society and invites us to take his side. He rejects the social order, and there is no spiritual realm; '— Des dieux?…— Par hasard j'ai pu naître; | Peut-être en est-il — par hasard…' (53–4). He also shows the pain of this isolation by evoking the absence of contact in concrete physical terms:

[53] 'Une étude sur Corbière', 8. 'Hegel' was crossed out in Laforgue's notes.
[54] *A Rhetoric of Irony*, 236. [55] Ibid. 236. [56] *L'Ironie*, 152.

— Quand je suis couché : ma patrie
C'est la couche seule et meurtrie
Où je vais forcer dans mes bras
Ma moitié, comme moi sans âme;
Et ma moitié : c'est une femme…
Une femme que je n'ai pas. (15–20)

Rather than bemoaning the absence of a companion, he describes an embrace, only to reveal there is no one there. The desired ideal is once again brought up against the stark reality of its absence. Ideas are frequently reduced to this tangible scale, or literalized, as in 'Mon avenir — Demain… demain' (44).

The poem presents isolation indirectly through humour; it both celebrates exile and undercuts the speaker's own negativity. Is 'Hommes libres! — carcan au cou —' (2), an attack on freedom or a mockery of the speaker's paradoxical beliefs? Unstable irony undermines everything, including its own processes. Is the speaker deriding himself for failing to find order in the universe, or is he stating a genuine belief that the universe is essentially absurd? Booth points out that these two stances entail two very different kinds of reading experience:

> For the second, infinite ironies present finally a treadmill, each step exactly like every other, the final revelation always the same: *nada*. Since the universe is empty, life is empty of meaning, and every reading experience can finally be shaken out into the same empty and melancholy non-truth. But for the first, the universe, though deceptive, is infinitely, invitingly various; each flash of ironic insight can lead us toward others, in a game never ending but always meaningful and exhilarating.[57]

To believe the cosmos is absurd is to believe in something after all, and referring everything to the void is another way of anchoring the text. Corbière's poetry is haunted by the spiritual void, but the patterns of his language are 'invitingly various', and he compensates for the emptiness with verbal exuberance.

'Paria' offers the most explicit assertion of cosmic absurdity in the book, but other poems, such as 'Libertà', evoke the *sensation* of living in this sort of absurd universe. 'Libertà' is an ode to freedom which extols captivity, and operates on the basic principle of reversal, asserting things by stating their opposite. The declaration that existence is imprisonment is a cliché, and presenting imprisonment as pleasure is

[57] *A Rhetoric of Irony*, 269.

one way of lamenting the realities of life, giving the poem exuberant energy although what it is saying is negative.[58] However, the target of the irony is not clear, and the poem makes us ask what motivates the systematic reversal. It derides freedom as an idea, and uses the term as the springboard for verbal play—the poem toys with ideas but treats them as clichés to be undermined. It uses oxymoron to play with the literary topos of liberty, and shows the emptiness of abstractions. The preponderance of abstract nouns, such as 'vanité', 'gaîté', 'nudité', 'virginité', 'Fidélité', and 'volupté', is unusual for Corbière, although the rhymes often yoke incongruous ones and reduce them to the burlesque. The title presents liberty as an abstraction, but the address-like subtitle points to a particular instance of enclosure: 'À la cellule IV bis (Prison Royale de Gênes)'. The ludicrously specific subtitle has generated debate about the likelihood of Corbière having been in prison during his Italian travels. However, the cell does not so much invite questions about the author's first-hand experience of the law as establish an equivalence between opposites: incarceration and freedom, ideas and reality.

The poem starts as a pseudo-allegory in which the cell paradoxically represents Liberty:

> Ô belle hospitalière
> Qui ne me connais pas,
> Vierge publique et fière
> Qui m'as ouvert les bras!… (1–4)

Corbière is here tapping into the complex network of feminine allegories for Liberty, who was variously personified as a secular saint or new goddess and dismissed as a prostitute. Maurice Agulhon's account of the development of Republican imagery points out that the tradition of 'live allegory' in particular gave counter-revolutionaries the opportunity to characterize Liberty as a prostitute, for it was often claimed that the women dressed up as allegories were actresses and thus presumed to be licentious.[59] In *L'Éducation sentimentale* Flaubert refers to a live allegory in the Tuileries palace after the 1848 revolution: 'Dans l'antichambre, debout sur un tas de vêtements, se tenait une fille publique, en statue

[58] As in 'Laisser-courre' which is about exile but celebrates the joys of life which have been left behind.

[59] Maurice Agulhon, *Marianne into Battle: Republican Imagery and Symbolism in France, 1789–1880*, trans. Janet Lloyd (Cambridge University Press and Paris: Maison des Sciences de l'Homme, 1981), 27–30.

de la Liberté, — immobile, les yeux grands ouverts, effrayante.'[60] David Bellos has pointed out that the Liberty in Delacroix's *La Liberté guidant le peuple* looks allegorical to modern viewers but for viewers of 1831 she was unmistakeably a prostitute represented with realistic touches of dirt and hair.[61] This kind of symbolism finds its way into poetic metaphors too: in *La Légende des siècles*, Hugo describes liberty (represented by a comet) as a 'fille publique'.[62] All of these associations feed the Corbière text, such that his description of Liberty as a 'Vierge publique', a paradoxical pun on 'fille publique', alludes to the ambiguous status of the political allegory as well as presenting a variation on that favourite nineteenth-century dichotomy of prostitute and virgin.

The rest of the poem goes on to play up the contradictions in this composite female addressee, who takes on a life of her own, becoming identified with the Goddess of love:

> Comme la Vénus nue,
> D'un bain de lait de chaux
> Tu sors, blanche Inconnue,
> Fille des noirs cachots. (9–12)

Her flesh may literally be pale because she has been hidden from light in the dungeon, but the chromatic contrast of white and black also seems to be generated by two independent sets of clichés. First, the name Venus automatically summons up an image of a pale beauty. The reference to a 'bain de lait' plays on the picture of a Botticelli figure rising from the waves, by referring it to another myth of feminine beauty, Cleopatra's bath of asses' milk, which is in turn debased by the idea of whitewash, returning to the literal setting of the prison walls. Secondly, the word 'cachot' is accompanied by the expected epithet 'noir'. The darkness literally contradicts the suggestion of white walls, but darkness is the basis of stereotypical descriptions of imprisonment, and Corbière is playing on precisely this cliché. The contrast between white and black does not merely describe a pale woman in a dark cell, but is a meeting of two autonomous descriptive systems.

[60] Gustave Flaubert, *Œuvres complètes de Gustave Flaubert* (Paris: Club de L'Honnête Homme, 1971), iii. 289.

[61] 'In the Mind's Eye: The Meanings of *Liberty Guiding the People*', in *The Process of Art: Essays on Nineteenth-Century French Literature, Music and Painting in Honour of Alan Raitt*, ed. Mike Freeman, Elizabeth Fallaize, et al. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), 11–24 (16–18).

[62] 'Là-Haut', *La Légende des siècles*, Pléiade (Paris: Gallimard, 1950), 493.

A way of reading which tackles such distortions of mimesis, and also the accompanying ironies, is Riffaterre's semiotic approach. Riffaterre treats both non-mimetic and ironic strategies as forms of semantic indirection which create poetic meaning: 'a poem says one thing and means another.'[63] He shows how a reader first approaches the language of a poem as though it were referential, but that contradictory details, which he calls 'ungrammaticalities', force the reader to reconsider it at a semiotic level. At this level the poem can be seen as the transformation of a matrix, a hypothetical 'minimal and literal sentence'—which may be one word, a cliché, quotation, or description—'into a longer complex, and nonliteral periphrasis'.[64] The high incidence of contradictions in Corbière's poetry obliges the reader to move rapidly to this semiotic level. Riffaterre says that the 'detour around the repressed matrix, being made of separate distinct ungrammaticalities, looks like a series of inappropriate, twisted wordings', which is a good description of 'Libertà'.[65] Riffaterre describes irony as a transformation which is not semantic; as the matrix will always have a positive or negative orientation, the transformation can consist 'of nothing more than such a permutation of the markers, turning a mimesis which is normally positive into a code of universal condemnation'.[66] In the case of 'Libertà', a negative topos, the jail, is turned into a code of eulogy.

The basic ironic inversion leads to distortions of mimesis and a series of 'inappropriate, twisted wordings', which suggest analogies between different kinds of experience. The development of an autonomous female figure introduces an erotic theme, which is superimposed onto the notion of liberty: the phrase 'franche nudité' suggests erotic openness but the oldest meaning of 'franc' is 'free' in a more general sense. 'Nudité' refers both to the woman's nakedness and the bareness of the dungeon walls. An equivalence is established between openness and closedness in physical love, as the truth of virginity is regarded with indifference: 'vraie ou fausse, se rouvre | Une virginité!' (23–4), just as the prison cell's closure is described as open. Architectural boundaries are linked with bodily ones, culminating in the 'Tombeau de volupté' (32).

Individual details are connected through wordplay, but the abstractions do not add up to a coherent whole. Is the poet suggesting existence is imprisonment, or reflecting on the plight of the poet, or mocking

[63] Michael Riffaterre, *Semiotics of Poetry* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978; repr. London: Methuen, 1980), 1.
[64] Ibid. 19. [65] Ibid. 21. [66] Ibid. 65–6.

the ideal of liberty for being an idea, or indirectly celebrating freedom by ironically praising its opposite? The discovery of freedom in prison is a theme famously explored by Stendhal in *La Chartreuse de Parme*, but that novel locates the paradox in a narrative context, whereas Corbière's condensed poem makes the ironic juxtaposition its very *raison d'être*. The oxymoron of 'Quatre murs! — Liberté!' (40), like the line 'Hommes libres! — carcan au cou —' in 'Paria' (2), is ironic, but it is not possible simply to activate the device of irony to reconstruct a real meaning. There is little interest in reversing the statement and settling for a reductive final meaning that four walls are really imprisonment. Furthermore, the telegraphic style cuts out any emotive cues which might invite readers to interpret the poem as expressing a state of mind (feigning joy in order to disguise despair) rather than focusing on its conceptual content. The telegraphic style also avoids tracing the sort of reasoning process which might equate captivity with freedom, for instance by following the Romantic logic that solitude is freedom. It also avoids specifying whether the starting point was the empirical four walls or the idea of liberty. 'Quatre murs! — Liberté!' is purely paradoxical when singled out as an ironic formula, but is loaded with significance in the context of the poem as whole. The interest of the poem lies in the semantic indirection and the uncertainties built into the language. It is not a description of prison experience but a witty bricolage making connections between unexpected experiences. Each element belongs in several systems, so many themes are dealt with simultaneously, and it is impossible to decide which one (love, freedom, art) was the starting point which generated the others.

Similarly, it is not clear what is concrete ground and what is figure. Décor is elevated from backdrop detail to central allegory. The pitcher, normally a mere metonymic prop in the prison setting, takes on a metaphoric function and is likened to the cell itself:

> Cruche, au moins ingénue,
> Puits de la vérité!
> Vide, quand on l'a bue…
> — Vase de pureté! — (69–72)

Furthermore, given that the poem is governed by a female figure, the 'cruche' suggests the image of a 'cruche cassée', connoting lost virginity. 'Cruche' also activates the adjectival usage, meaning 'stupid'. 'Ingénue' repeats the implication but replaces the insult with a term which connotes commendable innocence, and also happens to be a legal term

for 'free'. This whole description is also a reference to the traditional representation of 'Vérité' as an unclothed female figure emerging from a well, recalling the description of Venus in the second stanza. The obvious parallel between Truth and Liberty, both allegorical female figures, is reinforced by the way in which words syntactically linked to each are given independent phonetic and metaphorical links too.

A third female figure is the Muse, who introduces the theme of art, leading to a meditation on writing as freedom and the benefits of solitude for artistic endeavour. The act of writing, undertaken in a cell-like garret as befits the archetypal *poète maudit*, is a liberation: the poetic text can juxtapose things that would be mutually exclusive in the real world. The cell represents the poem in which contradictory elements coexist, and, like a poem, the cell offers both freedom and constraints. The formal restriction in 'Libertà' is that incarceration has to be represented as liberty. The artist is free in two senses: as a maker of poems he can reconcile opposites through wordplay; as a spiritual being he can shut himself into an ivory tower and declare himself free. If solitude is the starting point, there is a sort of double reversal: Corbière mocks the figurative cliché of the poet finding freedom in solitude, by ironically portraying solitude as a literal imprisonment. 'Paria' complements 'Libertà'; both use indirect ways of asserting freedom, but the real freedom is in the language. Although these poems express attitudes to life, Corbière rarely deals so openly in the currency of ideas, but more often builds the sense of the 'déroute de l'absolu' into the nuts and bolts of his language.

The sort of self-mockery we saw in poems like 'Épitaphe' and 'À la mémoire de Zulma' does not just convey an inner void, but also implies condemnation of the more general spiritual void which characterizes the modern world. Exiles who borrow the terms of the world to deride themselves are at the same time deriding the world for taking itself too seriously, and presenting themselves as anti-heroes with whom the reader should side. Similarly, the poet denigrates his own dissonance, yet simultaneously boasts that it is an authentic quality superior to Lamartinian lyricism. The effect of ironizing one aesthetic is not to reinforce another, but to undercut both. This cutting two ways is the mechanism by which Corbière evokes the void in both the self and the world, and makes it impossible to identify a coherent value system. Speakers attack themselves using the terms of society, and then attack society, so everything is discredited. If one goes to the lengths

of ironizing idealism, one implies nostalgia for it. As Wayne Booth says, irony presents a new view as a look back upon an old inferior one.[67] Corbière does not transform reality into a myth or transcend it with beauty, but makes contradiction his essence, and expresses the resultant irritation with concrete precision. The world is not neatly reversed, but the very process of reversal is constantly enacted at the level of the phrase, and never allows us to settle on neutral ground. Idealism is shown to be ridiculously sentimental by being brought up against sordid reality, whose hollowness in turn suggests an aspiration to something beyond. Transcendence and spleen are juxtaposed in such a way as to produce a chaotic jumble of values rather than an overarching Baudelairian dualism. Corbière pushes the strategy to its limits in order to devalue everything, and does not invoke an overarching framework to explain the vacillation between opposites. Just as he piles up synonyms and parallel constructions, so he accumulates local ironies in a chain which is never anchored by a cosmic meta-irony.

Unstable irony may be a sign of emptiness but, in the process of deferring an explicit acknowledgement of the void, it can communicate a plenitude of other things. Jankélévitch emphasizes that irony is open-ended rather than closed; it takes the reader on a voyage which 'n'est pas un détour, ni du temps perdu; ce voyage est, comme toute médiation, une épreuve.'[68] Irony may take the reader on a circuitous journey through time and space, but it also needs to be seen as a speech event occurring within a communicative circuit, as an interaction between author, reader, and characters. If irony suggests that the reader should think, it is imperative to view it as an intersubjective process.

POLYPHONY

Corbière's verse frustrates attempts to read it according to existing models. Biography is exposed as a fiction, and poems which one might expect to conform to a type, such as the epitaph, only subvert expectations. Habitual ways of reading irony as oxymoron, mask, or cosmic philosophy are of limited use. The ironies manifested variously in the rhetorical surface, the postures, and the world-view need to be brought within a single perspective, and a way of doing this is to examine how irony works

[67] *A Rhetoric of Irony*, 36. [68] *L'Ironie*, 63.

as a communicative strategy or dialogue. Edmund Wilson describes this kind of poetry as 'conversational-ironic',[69] and it is worth unpacking his term to consider how the evasiveness of irony is inextricably linked to the immediacy of living speech. We have already seen instances of this: the use of contrasting voices in successive poems, and the plurality of voices which coexist within the individual 'À Marcelle' poems.

Corbière's poems present themselves as living utterances. Lyric poetry is traditionally determined by its orality, as Valéry famously declares: 'Le lyrisme est le genre de poésie qui suppose la voix en action' and 'Le lyrisme est le développement d'une exclamation.'[70] It is the Romantics who harnessed the inherent orality of the lyric form as a medium for voicing the inner self, turning the genre into a vehicle for expressing subjectivity, and initiating a vogue for excessive confession and declamation. Like irony, lyricism became an idea, and its form yoked to an existential theme. Corbière constantly challenges the assumption that lyric poetry should be a direct expression of the self. Romantic poetry had presented itself as the representation of a spoken performance, and had been organized around a set of identifiable 'rhetorical situations', a term used by John Porter Houston to encompass 'the relationships among author, speaker, person or thing addressed, subject matter, and reader'.[71] Corbière disrupts the sort of clear-cut relationships between speaker and reader which had characterized Romantic verse: the lover opening his heart to a listener, or the *mage* declaiming to the human race. These stances are the product of a historically specific cultural form, and Corbière exposes them as such.

In defining himself against the lyric, Corbière is thus engaging with a form which plays on communicative situations to explore subjectivity, and it is significant that the same is true of irony. As Linda Hutcheon points out, 'Irony is a relational strategy in the sense that it operates not only between meanings (said, unsaid) but between people (ironists, interpreters, targets).'[72] Both irony and poetry stage intersubjectivity in action, and Corbière fuses the two in innovative ways, using irony to blur conventional rhetorical situations, and poetic compression to blur traditional stable irony.

Corbière's poetry gives a clear sense of a speaking voice; its conversational irony permits performative force whilst avoiding Romantic

[69] *Axel's Castle*, 96.
[70] Paul Valéry, *Œuvres*, Pléiade (Paris: Gallimard, 1960), ii. 549.
[71] *French Symbolism and the Modernist Movement*, 7.
[72] *Irony's Edge*, 58.

eloquence and bombast. Exclamations and questions lend a strong expressive force, and colloquial and demotic expressions give an oral feel. Frenetic punctuation and typographical variations are used to build intonation into the writing. As Laforgue says, 'la moitié de son vers est dans l'intonation, le geste et les grimaces du diseur'.[73] For instance, in 'À une camarade', the speaker utters a monologue strongly coloured by what Roman Jakobson calls the 'emotive' function of language,[74] to evoke a crisis point in his relationship with the addressee:

> Que nous sommes-nous donc fait l'un à l'autre?…
> — Rien… — Peut-être alors que c'est pour cela;
> — Quel a commencé? — Pas moi, bon apôtre!
> Après, quel dira: c'est donc tout — voilà! (21–4)

The emphatic tone suggests a forceful presence, yet uncertainty about the speaker's position is built into the language; his violence both travesties the conventional discourse of love, and masks sensitivity. The utterance is literally a vociferous denial that anything has happened, but the emotive force suggests the speaker is struggling to extricate himself from something that has happened. The discourse is interrupted by interjections from the feminine 'camarade', but it is difficult to decide if the two parties are speaking as one and hence in accord over events, if he is quarrelling with her, or indeed projecting what he would like her to say. Such texts are difficult to read as a record of a unified performance by a clearly delineated subject, and fall into the category of writing that Vološinov describes as 'voice-defying'.[75] In his discussion of indirect discourse, Vološinov argues that it is the silent reading of prose that has made possible the 'multileveledness and voice-defying complexity of intonational structures that are so characteristic for modern literature'. However, Corbière creates a voice-defying discourse by playing on the rhetorical situations specific to lyric poetry.

It is illuminating to approach Corbière's poetry through the optic offered by the writings of Vološinov and Bakhtin, who present language

[73] 'Une étude sur Corbière', 7.

[74] Defined in 'Linguistics and poetics', in *Style in Language*, ed. Thomas Sebeok (Cambridge, MA: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 1960), 350–77 (354) as 'a direct expression of the speaker's attitude toward what he is talking about' which is 'laid bare in the interjections, flavours to some extent all our utterances, on their phonic, grammatical, and lexical level'.

[75] V. N. Vološinov, *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*, trans. Ladislav Matejka and I. R. Titunik (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986), 156.

as inherently dialogic. They emphasize that language is a social activity and utterances always embedded in a context; speech acts are produced in response to others and in anticipation of an answer. In this view, a plurality of discourses traverse the social sphere, and individual utterances are inhabited by disparate voices. The most systematic version of Bakhtin's analysis of literary polyphony is given in *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*. Although Bakhtin saw a stark opposition between the celebration of polyphony found in novels by authors such as Dostoevsky and the oppressive monologism which he saw as a characteristic of poetry, Corbière's irony has much in common with novelistic techniques such as dialogue, quotation, and indirect discourse.

An advantage of the Bakhtinian model is that it enables one to explore parallels between Corbière's poetry and experiments in the novels of the time, which are all variations on the quest for impersonality. However, this approach cannot account for the many ways in which Corbière subverts conventions specific to lyric poetry. Anglo-American methodologies, following the example of Eliot, tackle the voice-defying potential within poetry itself and thus complement the Bakhtinian perspective. Critics of nineteenth-century poetry in English are more alert to the artifice of the lyric subject, partly because this period saw the rise of the dramatic monologue, a form which engineers distance between the writing poet and speaking persona. Indeed, one of the reproaches levelled at New Criticism has been that it reads all poems as though they were implied dramatic monologues. However, approaches in the New Critical tradition are appropriate to Corbière's particular kind of poetry. Eric Griffiths in particular has emphasized that attention to voice is crucial to the reading of poetry.

Poetry lies somewhere between speaking and writing; it is written to produce a speaking voice effect, a fictional communicative circuit. Eric Griffiths goes so far as to assert that acknowledging 'the printed character of the poetic voice in most texts involves a recognition of the very conditions of poetic meaning.'[76] He argues that since 'the sentences of the written language frequently [. . .] remain indeterminate between several semantically distinct vocal utterances, and can become unambiguous only when spoken',[77] the reader of poetry is forced to imagine a voicing which will bring the text to life:

[76] Eric Griffiths, *The Printed Voice of Victorian Poetry* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), 60.

[77] Ibid. 18.

The spoken voice, more richly than writing, conveys, in emphasis and intonation, by stress and juncture, and so on, much of the illocutionary force of any utterance. Not that the wealth of such features in vocal utterance is always an advantage; creative opportunities may also arise from the comparative absence of vocal quality in print.[78]

This intonational ambiguity is the source of 'great reserve, multiplicity, self-checking, and pliability of intention in writers'.[79] Corbière plays extensively on the fact that poetry is an aesthetic representation of speech and not just a record of an actual oral performance. Like Cros, Verlaine, Laforgue, and Richepin, he was interested in the spoken style, but, whereas the monologues of Charles Cros read like a transcription of café-concert performances,[80] Corbière's verse does not originate from this milieu, and its performative quality is folded into a writerly texture. We are constantly reminded that his writing is contrived to project a mere illusion of speech, and yet we simultaneously suspend disbelief and hear living voices speaking through each other.

It is possible to identify three ways in which Corbière blurs the rhetorical situation of lyric poems to produce a voice-defying discourse. First, he parodies the very convention of the lyric voice by exposing speakers as artificial constructs. The most strikingly forceful and expressive speakers are often being parodied by the very language they are apparently uttering. As Laforgue says, '— à chaque sortie il avertit: vous savez! me prenez pas au sérieux. tout ça c'est fait de chic, je pose. Je vais même vous expliquer comment ça se fabrique'.[81] Instead of being a vague lyric voice with which the audience is expected to identify, the speaker becomes a comic persona.[82] As Jakobson has pointed out, any poetry is a sort of reported message, 'speech within speech', since it is a fictional utterance by a lyric subject, and used as a real communication between author and reader.[83] I discussed above how the idea of a mask is used to

[78] Ibid. 60. [79] Ibid. 48.

[80] Daniel Grojnowski demonstrates that the eruption of the spoken style into poetry at this time was closely linked to cabaret culture, *Aux commencements du rire moderne: L'Esprit fumiste* (Paris: Corti, 1997), 89.

[81] 'Une étude sur Corbière', 2.

[82] In *Stages of Self: The Dramatic Monologues of Laforgue, Mallarmé and Valéry* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1990), Elizabeth Howe points out that 'the vagueness of the lyric "I" allows the reader to identify with the speaker, adopting the "I" as his own voice, putting himself in the speaker's place.' She contrasts this with dramatic monologues which engineer distance between the poet and his lyric persona by a variety of means, one of which is irony (17–18). While Corbière's poems are not monologues in the strict sense, his ironic distancing of the speaker has much in common with that form.

[83] 'Linguistics and Poetics', 371.

recuperate instabilities in Corbière's poetry, and this approach can be nuanced by examining carefully how the mask effect is created by the language. Corbière revels in the fictionality of the utterance by creating the poetic equivalent of the 'unreliable narrator'. A good example of the unreliable *je lyrique* is the speaking pipe in 'La Pipe au poète', a parody of Baudelaire's 'La Pipe'. It is easy to label it 'ironic', because it wittily derides the poet, but the irony is not easy to pin down. The title, 'La Pipe au poète', simultaneously means 'The poet's Pipe' and 'the Pipe said to the poet'. The first possibility may seem the more obvious, being rooted in the naming function of language, but the second is a reminder of the interpersonal function which is so vital to irony. Rather than depicting a subordinate 'poet's pipe', it consists of a monologue uttered by an insubordinate pipe. Whereas Baudelaire's pipe refers respectfully to its master, Corbière's pipe immediately hijacks the poem and reduces the poet to a comically pathetic figure:

> Je suis la Pipe d'un poète,
> Sa nourrice, et: j'endors *sa Bête*. (1–2)

By adopting the grammatical first person the pipe gains the corresponding confidence of a Romantic *je lyrique*. The pipe mocks the poet's dreams and madness, yet the effect of this banal object having such a self-important tone is to make it in turn an object of comedy. Whenever the pipe deflates the poet, it simultaneously emphasizes its own ludicrous presumption, for instance by appropriating the capital 'P' normally used to consecrate the poet. The rhetorical situation is a source of ambiguity, because the pipe ironizes the poet, but as the pipe is itself a comic character we do not know to what extent to trust the pipe's evaluation of the poet. Many of Corbière's poems create similar effects without the motivation of devices as transparent as the speaking pipe. Each poem has a different persona, sometimes highly particularized, as in the case of the pipe. Speakers are routinely made figures of fun when their discourse is undercut from within. This framing of the speaker as a comic character reflects the breakdown in communication between poet and audience; the way Corbière alienates the reader from his personae contrasts sharply with the way Hugo invokes shared experience to encourage his reader to identify with his lyric persona.[84]

[84] As stated in his preface to *Les Contemplations*: 'quand je vous parle de moi, je vous parle de vous', Victor Hugo, *Œuvres poétiques*, 3 vols., Pléiade (Paris: Gallimard, 1964–74), ii (1967), 482.

A second way in which Corbière disrupts the *je lyrique* is by breaking up the unified linear utterance. This is achieved by juxtaposing fragments of speech by different voices. It is a distinctive feature of Corbière's poems that they rarely address the reader directly. Instead, they often consist of dialogues played out for the benefit of the reader. The idea of poetry as conversation overheard is not novel, but Corbière stretches the practice to its limits by making it difficult for the reader to position him or herself in relation to the conversations. For instance, 'Ça?' is a stylized dialogue in which a police interrogator proposes a series of potted definitions of *Les Amours jaunes*, all of which the poet playfully contradicts.[85] The dialogic alternation makes for a litany of oxymoronic lines, which begins by problematizing the notion of the book:

> Des essais? — Allons donc, je n'ai pas essayé!
> Étude? — Fainéant je n'ai jamais pillé.
> Volume? — Trop broché pour être relié…
> De la copie? — Hélas non, ce n'est pas payé! (1–4)

The poet as criminal is one version of the *poète maudit*. The interrogator embodies the puzzlement of a readership clinging to conventional categories, and the replies embody the poet's wit. The dialogue stages the clash between the two, so the book is presented in terms of two antithetical perspectives on it, rather than as a determinate object. Neither interlocutor holds the whole truth but the definition of the book is the sum of the contradictions, so the poem's sense lies in the relationship between the voices. The repeated rejection of attempts to pigeon-hole the volume implies that it resists definition, yet the poem as a whole defines the book's complex and contradictory particularity. *Les Amours jaunes* contains elements of all the possibilities enumerated and looks different when viewed from different quarters. No single evaluation within the work itself can be taken as definitive, for they vary from 'mon enfant' to 'son honteux monstre de livre', and the sense of any such statement depends on the context. The moralistic terms of criticism and the way the poet is hounded as a miscreant imply that poetry is deviant, but there is also a certain pride in this. The book conveys no clear indication of how it is to be read. In contrast to many self-referential parodic texts, *Les Amours jaunes* does not address the reader directly, and speakers in the poems rarely step

[85] This echoes the opening of the Satires of Persius; Satire I consists of a dialogue between Persius and a friend, in which the poet attacks the literary taste of his time.

aside to comment on their own performance. Self-awareness is conveyed indirectly, so it is difficult to extract a consistent metapoetic stance. This is no monologic ironist simply uttering oxymorons, but the paradoxes are created through the movement of the dialogue.

The third way in which Corbière blurs rhetorical situations is by fusing voices. This is fundamental to his texture even in the most straightforward monologues. It is particularly illuminating to reassess his parodic quotation of literary texts and clichés in this light. For instance, the discourse of sentimental lyricism is frequently paraphrased by realist speakers using it with critical distance, as in 'Steam-boat':

> En fumée elle est donc chassée
> L'éternité, la traversée
> Qui fit de Vous ma sœur d'un jour,
> Ma sœur d'amour!… (1–4)

The poetic cliché of eternity is undercut by being yoked with the transient 'traversée', which is then further cut down to 'un jour'. It is a cliché which the lovers might have used in vows made to each other in the heat of the moment, but here it is quoted with cynical distance to point out that the encounter was a brief one.[86] Although 'éternité' is undercut by this bathos, it nonetheless opens up the rather neutral 'traversée' into something more promising. The enormity of eternity is actually highlighted by its being unexpectedly smuggled into a small-scale description, so the context gives the well-worn word new life. The realist speaker does not destroy the sentimental discourse he inhabits, but gives it a new resonance.

This use of 'éternité' can be labelled ironic, but classical definitions of irony as a discrepancy between what is said and what is meant cannot account for its significance. This sort of irony can usefully be read in the terms suggested by Sperber and Wilson, as a quotation of existing material in such a way as to express an attitude towards it, as well as communicating something by means of it.[87] Such an operation can be clearly seen in Corbière's ironic quotation of evaluating words like 'bon' and 'bien'. The lexical meaning of these terms is positive, and, as they indicate that a judgement has been made, they tend to imply the presence of an authoritative speaker. When such words are quoted

[86] See also 'Après la pluie': 'Veux-tu, d'une amour fidelle, | Eternelle! | Nous adorer pour ce soir?' (43–5).

[87] Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson, 'Les Ironies comme mentions', *Poétique*, 36 (1978), 399–412.

ironically, their positive value is challenged. Approval and disapproval coexist within one short word, dividing the speaker and making him difficult to pin down. A playful example of this is found in 'Vésuves et C^{ie}', which describes how a poet visiting Vesuvius finds that images of the volcano remembered from childhood have a greater impact than the real thing:

> Pompeïa-station — Vésuve, est-ce encor toi?
> Toi qui fis mon bonheur, tout petit, en Bretagne,
> — Du bon temps où la foi transportait la montagne —
> Sur un bel abat-jour, chez une tante à moi. (1–4)

Childhood is literally described as the 'bon temps'. Such idealization is a Romantic cliché, and the nasal assonance reinforces the stereotypical status of the phrase by binding the two words into a self-evident block.[88] The syntactically unanchored 'tout petit' has already belittled both the self, his happiness, and the volcano. Furthermore, the figurative expression that faith moves mountains looks as though it is being taken literally, since the poem is about a volcano. The naive credulity of childhood is thus exaggerated to the point of ridicule by the knowing adult. The poem simultaneously mocks and idealizes childhood, so 'bon' has a double intonation.

Evaluative terms like *bon* and *bien* are often charged with irony, because irony reverses values rather than meanings, as Philippe Hamon emphasizes:

> Le discours [ironique] est certes dédoublé, à double sens, souvent médiatisé (il est l'« écho » d'un autre discours), mais il vaudrait mieux dire, pour mieux rendre compte de toute sa complexité, à double valeur. Sa visée, en effet, n'est pas strictement et uniquement informative (dire a pour non-a, ou inversement), mais évaluative.[89]

Irony itself is an indirect means of conveying an evaluation. For Hutcheon, irony has a cutting edge and thus an emotive force.[90] For Booth, irony 'fuses fact and value, requiring us to construct alternative hierarchies and choose among them',[91] and reading stable irony involves assessing whether the false meaning rejected by the reader

[88] Anne Herschberg-Pierrot shows how clichés insert preconstructed knowledge into a text by packing it into particular forms which present it as presupposed and obvious, 'Problématiques du cliché', *Poétique*, 43 (1980), 334–5.

[89] Philippe Hamon, *L'Ironie littéraire: Essai sur les formes de l'écriture oblique* (Paris: Hachette, 1996), 28.

[90] *Irony's Edge*, 37. [91] *A Rhetoric of Irony*, 44.

is also rejected by the author.[92] This entails making a decision about the author's knowledge or beliefs, which is particularly difficult in writing like Corbière's, which does not present decidable beliefs. He borrows evaluative terms, not wholeheartedly to assert or challenge an ideology but to empty them of their positive and negative weight and to evoke the contingency of belief. Double-voiced utterances are used to juxtapose competing value-systems.

Double-voiced utterances like 'bon temps' come close to the first strategy I described, whereby a speaker is exposed as fictional and his utterance parodied from within. Indeed, the three strategies—emphasizing the poem as 'speech within speech', juxtaposing contradictory voices in sequence, and fusing them—are constantly recombined in new ways. Marie Maclean says that Baudelaire's prose poems 'reflect the many possible variants of the writer–reader relationship' and use a variety of narrative voices and focalization.[93] Similarly, Corbière confuses the relationships between author, speaker, addressee, subject matter, and reader from within verse poetry. Instead of submitting to the endless uncertainties of the irony, it is useful to examine the ways in which he manipulates these relationships, and the rest of this book will examine in more depth the variety of effects produced by the different configurations.

Corbière's poems are not readable according to classic notions of irony as a code of reversibility, in which ironist and target are clearly defined, but display a more modern open-ended, unstable kind of irony. Hamon suggests that one can describe as 'modern' the 'type d'ironie qui laisse flotter à la fois les cibles, les sens à reconstituer, et l'origine même de sa parole'.[94] Roland Barthes distinguishes between traditional irony, which is a feature of 'lisible' modes of writing,[95] and the polyphonic kind which is characteristic of the modern writerly texts he celebrates. His description of Flaubert's 'ironie frappée d'incertitude' is characteristically acute:

> il n'arrête pas le jeu des codes (où l'arrête mal), en sorte que (c'est là sans doute la *preuve* de l'écriture) *on ne sait jamais s'il est responsable de ce qu'il écrit* (s'il y

[92] *A Rhetoric of Irony*, 11.

[93] Marie Maclean, *Narrative as Performance: The Baudelairian Experiment* (London: Routledge, 1988), 48.

[94] *L'Ironie littéraire*, 36.

[95] 'Le code ironique est en principe une citation explicite d'autrui; mais l'ironie joue le rôle d'une affiche et par là détruit la multivalence qu'on pouvait espérer d'un discours citationnel.' Roland Barthes, *S/Z*, Points (Paris: Seuil, 1970), 46.

a un sujet *derrière* son langage); car l'être de l'écriture (le sens du travail qui la constitue) est d'empêcher de jamais répondre à cette question: *Qui parle?*[96]

Corbière does something similar by making it impossible to read his poetry according to the convention of the lyric voice, and the uncertainty over 'who speaks' is more disturbing in a lyric poem than in a Flaubert novel. Corbière thereby lays bare the workings of lyric poetry. Novelistic techniques of irony and indirect speech are imported into lyric poetry to deride it from within, yet they introduce a strikingly modern mode of representing subjectivity, which reinvigorates the genre's concern with identity. Such voice-defying poetry reflects its disenchanted age; the socially marginalized poet can no longer declaim confidently to an audience, but fragments his speech to evoke the hesitations of a consciousness grappling with the modern world. The chapters that follow will examine the way these techniques are used both to problematize the subject and to fragment the outside world.

However, poems with very different themes share a common feature; they all force the reader to participate in the elucidation of meaning. In *Les Amours jaunes*, irony is an effect arising from the relationship between the lines rather than being the result of monologic performance by an ironist. It is not possible to determine the meaning of any line read in isolation. Taken to extremes, this produces a multidirectional irony where the speaker is lost in a series of mentions. Rather than just inviting the reader to jump through hoops in order to join the author on a safe platform, this sort of irony challenges the reader. Commentators have been driven to seek elaborate biographical explanations for the troubled self-identity, but it can also be explained as an effect produced in the reader through the play on voice. Polyphony operates in such a way as to make the self difficult to pin down, and this difficulty is not something to be overcome, but is built into the poetry to produce a complex suggestivity. By forcing the reader to ask who is speaking, to question the authority of each voice, and to negotiate multi-layered constructs, the poetry obliges him or her to experience the sensation of uncertainty which is one of its most powerful themes, and to participate actively in the process of not being able to make sense.

[96] Ibid. 134.

2

Describing Brittany: Multiple Perspectives

In the 'Armor' and 'Gens de mer' sections of *Les Amours jaunes*, Corbière's voice-defying style is used to describe the external world of Brittany and the sea. These so-called Brittany poems are generally seen as narrative and descriptive, and contrasted with the more self-reflexive and personal Paris poems. The contrast between settings certainly divides the book, and Corbière's poetry clearly falls into two broad types, which Laforgue distinguishes as follows:

> Une où *il raconte en vers* sans armatures, ni volutes, qui se désagrégeraient sans le coup de fouet incessant de l'expression mordante et la poigne d'ensemble. [. . .] L'autre *plus intime*, tout subjectif, replié sur soi ou à Paris ou sur l'eau et très-self comme métier sans que ce métier soit riche.[1]

The geographical distinction does not coincide exactly with the formal difference, because, as Laforgue indicates, the 'intime' is explored both in Paris and at sea, and descriptive passages are found throughout the volume. However, although outwardly focused poems are not found solely in 'Armor' and 'Gens de mer', the techniques identified in Laforgue's first category can be most clearly seen in examples from these Brittany sections. As these texts paint a picture of a recognizable world using versions of familiar literary techniques, they have much to tell us about how Corbière plays on conventional ways of reading. An understanding of these strategies will help us later understand the more *sui generis* poems which completely overturn such conventions. Since the Brittany sections are generally thought to have been composed first, focusing on these texts is also a way of tracking the emergence of Corbière's style. By defamiliarizing the world and challenging literary conventions, the Brittany poems experiment with the aesthetic of

[1] 'Une étude sur Corbière', 2.

indirection which was taken to extreme in later poems. Instead of reading the Brittany poems in opposition to the Paris ones, I shall examine how Corbière's approach to Breton subject matter shaped his art.

The idiosyncratic style of *Les Amours jaunes* makes Corbière's Brittany very different from the sort of picturesque verse produced by Auguste Brizeux. Heather Williams has shown how such poetry about Brittany gained popularity in the nineteenth century by using clichés aimed at a Parisian audience, and points out that Corbière disrupts these clichés.[2] His familiarity with Breton culture permeates the poems of 'Armor', but it is often filtered through the optic of an outsider. This can be seen clearly in his use of the Breton language. As part of his linguistic patchwork, he uses words based on Breton vocabulary, such as 'cornandons' (derived from 'kornandouns', which denotes a kind of fantastic dwarf),[3] and neologisms based on Breton words, such as 'ankokrignets' (derived from 'ankou', a personification of death that haunts Breton culture).[4] However, these are the kind of words which would have been familiar to any French-speaking inhabitant of Brittany. They are not used merely for local colour but as part of a general strategy of juxtaposing different discourses. Pascal Rannou usefully analyses the importance of the Breton language in *Les Amours jaunes*, and makes the case for Corbière as a Breton poet by arguing that he adopted the regional culture as part of his disenchantment with the dominant class.[5] Corbière's relationship to Brittany is certainly not straightforward, and I shall focus on the ways he uses it to disorientate the reader, asking first how his dense language produces a vivid sense of the place and its people, and secondly how the poet obscures his relation to this concrete world.

Corbière has been admired for his realism, and represents Brittany with considerable precision, often specifying real locations in the peritext, and making vivid use of detail. The effect of precise particularity

[2] Heather Williams, 'Writing to Paris: Poets, Nobles and Savages in Nineteenth-Century Brittany', *French Studies*, 57 (2003), 475–90.

[3] 'Un riche en Bretagne', 36.

[4] 'La Rapsode foraine et le Pardon de Sainte-Anne', 166.

[5] Pascal Rannou (ed.), *Visages de Tristan Corbière* (Morlaix: Skol Vreizh, 1995), concisely assesses the extent of Corbière's debt to Brittany. For an extended account of *Les Amours jaune*s as a quest for Breton identity, see Pascal Rannou, 'De Corbière à Tristan: La Quête identitaire comme principe organisateur des *Amours jaunes*' (doctoral thesis, Université de Haute Bretagne, 1998), which argues that Corbière was brought up in a bourgeois milieu hostile to Breton civilization and rebelled by embracing this marginalized culture.

is a stylistic trait that Pound identifies in Gautier and Corbière as hardness.[6] At the same time, Corbière creates impressionistic blurs and makes it difficult to decide where his speakers stand. He resists the picturesque of earlier Breton poets in order to convey a more personal vision, and at times the poetry issues from its very heart, but at others seems to ironize it. The Brittany poems are often described as free of irony, but their fragmentation and polyphony are techniques central to Corbière's ironic aesthetic. The question of his distance from the Breton community and sailors he evokes is often linked to biographical factors; it is part of the legend that he was unable to be a sailor owing to poor health, and his poetry is often read as celebrating what he was denied in life. The way these poems have driven readers to seek biographical evidence to establish Corbière's attitude to his native Brittany is a sign of their ambivalence.

There are a number of reasons why it is difficult to identify a unified attitude to Brittany. Both 'Armor' and 'Gens de mer' contain a spectrum of different kinds of poem, ranging from impersonal description to personal lyricism. Laforgue's opposition represents a sliding scale rather than a rigid dichotomy, as Warren Ramsey points out.[7] Marshall Lindsay usefully divides Corbière's œuvre into poems of self-expression (grouped under the banner 'pose') and those which describe others ('regard').[8] He shows that the latter focus on outcasts and figures which mirror the poet, so that poems of both kinds explore the self. Poems range from quasi-ethnographic dissections of Breton folklore in 'Armor' to reworkings of ocean topoi in 'Gens de mer'. They alternate between two poles: celebration of sailors' vigour and virility, and compassion for outcasts or those enduring hardships as a result of the dangers of seafaring. Furthermore, conflicting points of view are combined within single poems. Sonnenfeld presents the Paris/Brittany opposition in monolithic symbolic terms, but the duality also operates at the level of the phrase. Instead of looking at Brittany in terms of its symbolic opposition to Paris, it is necessary to see how the combination of points of view makes it difficult to establish a fixed outlook. Rather than speculating how far Corbière might have taken a boat out to sea, it is more fruitful to focus on the stylistic combination of concrete realism and ironic distancing.

[6] Ezra Pound, *Literary Essays of Ezra Pound* (London: Faber, 1954), 288.

[7] Warren Ramsey, *Jules Laforgue and the Ironic Inheritance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1954), 96.

[8] *Le Temps jaune*, 22.

FRAGMENTING THE VISIBLE WORLD

Corbière's pictorial qualities have attracted less attention than his orality, but his poetry makes tangible a concrete world. His anti-rhetorical style, with its juxtapositions and ellipsis, is well suited to visual material, producing effects of simultaneity. Descriptions combine precision with disorientation, and are often crammed with vivid detail, as in the cabaret scene from 'Le Bossu Bitor':

> — Des Hollandais salés, lardés de couperose
> — De blonds Norvégiens hercules de chlorose;
> — Des Espagnols avec leurs figures en os;
> — Des baleiniers huileux comme des cachalots
> — D'honnêtes caboteurs bien carrés d'envergures,
> Calfatés de goudron sur toutes les coutures;
> — Des Nègres blancs, avec des mulâtres lippus;
> — Des Chinois, le chignon roulé sous un *gibus*,
> Vêtus d'un frac flambant-neuf et d'un parapluie. (131–9)

Corbière builds up a picture through exhaustive notation of visual observations which are juxtaposed without any interpretation. His close attention to the waterproofing of the 'caboteurs' verges on the microscopic, and his myopic vision belongs in the line of Gautier, Flaubert, and the Goncourts. For the Goncourt brothers, this optic is a sign of modernity: 'Le caractère de la littérature ancienne est d'être une littérature de presbyte, c'est-à-dire d'ensemble. Le caractère de la littérature moderne — et son progrès — est d'être une littérature de myope, c'est-à-dire de détails.'[9] *Les Amours jaunes* has affinities with the Goncourts' *écriture artiste*, and the resemblance was recognized by Laforgue, who noted that its 'procédés [. . .] sont, triplés et plus spontanés, ceux d'Anatole, de *Manette Salomon*'.[10] It is a well-known paradox that an excess of detail can make things harder to see, and this is particularly true when familiar objects are broken down into component parts denoted with specialist vocabulary. Like the Naturalists, Corbière uses a plethora of technical language, particularly in his representations of boats, as in 'Le Novice en partance et sentimental':

[9] Edmond Goncourt and Jules Goncourt, *Journal*, ed. Robert Ricatte (Paris: Robert Laffont, 1989), i. 971.

[10] 'Lettre', *Lutèce* (4–11 Oct. 1885). Repr. in Burch, *Sur Tristan Corbière*.

Et hisse le grand foc! — la loi me le commande. —
Largue les *garcettes*, sans gant! (37–8)

The specificity of the referents implies a realist desire to document life at sea, to initiate the reader into an exotic milieu, and to teach him or her about the purpose of unfamiliar objects. However, as Philippe Hamon points out, realist novelists include extended descriptions as a way of explaining technical terms and thus neutralizing 'ces lieux dangereux où une déflation sémantique, une illisibilité, risque de se produire'.[11] In contrast, Corbière's verse makes no room for explanation, and thus foregrounds the unreadability of these terms, which disconcert the general reader, for whom they are opaque and cannot conjure a visual image.[12] Hugo had already experimented with this effect of marine language in the visionary novel *Les Travailleurs de la mer*, and Corbière heightens the disorientation by writing in such a condensed style. This concision in turn contributes to the sense of concrete particularity. He crafts diverse sense impressions into a dense and precise style which Pound defines as 'hard-bit'.[13] Corbière underlines the sensuous particularity of things through devices of condensation such as ellipsis. The effect of chiselled precision in the description of the 'caboteurs' above is underlined by the sound patterning on [k].

Corbière systematically avoids vague and abstract words, a practice applauded by Max Jacob, who quotes Corbière's 'Matelots' as exemplifying the concrete style essential to true poetry. He argues 'En poésie la valeur précise du mot n'a de valeur que si cette précision est exagérée'.[14] 'La Rapsode foraine et le Pardon de Sainte-Anne' exemplifies Corbière's 'hard-bit' quality, for instance in its description of the statue of *sainte Anne* in the chapel:

Mère taillée à coups de hache,
Tout cœur de chêne dur et bon;
Sous l'or de ta robe se cache
L'âme en pièce d'un franc-Breton! (25–8)

Where Gautier's chiselled style is impersonal, Corbière conveys the emotional context of his description by incorporating words like 'bon'

[11] Philippe Hamon, *Introduction à l'analyse du descriptif* (Paris: Hachette, 1981), 45.
[12] Riffaterre argues in *La Production du texte* (Paris: Seuil, 1979) that the reader's ignorance of the exact referent of a technical term will draw attention to the word as a source of stylistic effect, 40–1.
[13] *Literary Essays of Ezra Pound*, 13.
[14] Max Jacob, *Conseils à un jeune poète* (Paris: Gallimard, 1945), 23.

drawn from everyday spoken language. Living words are used to evoke the perspective of an ordinary congregation, and, like most of Corbière's ekphrastic descriptions, this quatrain represents popular rather than high art.[15] Having described the statue as ravaged by suffering, as if it were human, the poem describes the suffering of living people in pictorial terms. It gives a lengthy description of the sick and maimed who habitually gather for a *pardon*, a Breton religious festival. The poem is a visual display: just as the infirm parade their suffering to make money, the speaker parades it to make his point. The bodies have a strong visual and emotive impact:

> Sont-ils pas divins sur leurs claies,
> Qu'auréole un nimbe vermeil,
> Ces propriétaires de plaies,
> Rubis vivants sous le soleil!… (129–32)

Redness, with its connotations of blood, is expressed by the specific 'vermeil' and 'rubis', and the colour takes on a life of its own independently of the wounds. The verb *auréoler* is an artistic term meaning to draw a halo, suggesting the observer is embellishing the picture, and that much of the significance is in the eye of the beholder. Sound patterning binds the components of 'rubis vivant' in a paradoxical union of animate flesh and inanimate mineral, ironically transmuting pain into decorative material. The theme of bodily disintegration also arises in 'Le Bossu Bitor', in which the contorted form of the eponymous hunchback is emphasized by the fragmented elliptic description: 'Un vrai bossu: cou tors et retors, très madré' (7). The emphasis on the brute materiality of flesh is underlined in the description of the dead hunchback's body at the end of the poem:

> Plus tard, l'eau soulevait une masse vaseuse
> Dans le dock. On trouva des plaques de vareuse…
> Un cadavre bossu, ballonné, démasqué
> Par les crabes. Et ça fut jeté sur le quai. (245–8)

First we are shown a 'masse vaseuse', the sound patterning dissolves the words into a morass to underline the sense. Closer investigation reveals traces of sailor's jacket, and finally the remains are identified

[15] Other examples include the description of the sailor's tattoo in 'Le Novice en partance et sentimental' (100–2), the ex-voto in 'La Rapsode foraine et le Pardon de Sainte-Anne' (181), the poet's portrait of his lover in 'Un jeune qui s'en va' (30), and the keepsakes in 'Fleur d'art' (1–4).

as a corpse. While Corbière's style fractures anything monumental, it also evokes amorphous objects faithfully. He describes what the corpse looks like before explaining what it is in logical terms. This defamiliarizes the object, but also presents phenomena in the order in which they are apprehended by those discovering the body, rather than having an omniscient narrator tell us what he knows is there.

The fragmented style contributes to the effect of precision, by reflecting the transience and uncertainty of phenomena perceived. This is especially true of evocations of the weather and the sea. Corbière avoids extended descriptions of the ocean, a subject which induced prolixity in the Romantics, by giving only condensed glimpses. The sea is never described as a static picture, but fleetingly observed at intervals. Corbière concisely notes the violent effects of sea and weather, as in 'La Goutte':

> Sous un seul hunier — le dernier — à la cape,
> Le navire était soûl; l'eau sur nous faisait nappe. (1–2)

Laforgue asserts that Corbière 'a un métier sans intérêt plastique — l'intérêt, l'effet est dans le cinglé, la pointe-sèche, le calembour, la fringance, le haché romantique',[16] but the sketches of bulk and expanse in the examples above have a strong visual impact. As Laforgue also indicates, descriptions frequently collapse into wordplay, surprising metaphors, and caricature.[17] For instance, 'Le Naufrageur' plays ironically on Hugo's 'laine des moutons sinistres de la mer':[18]

> La mer moutonne!… Ho, mon troupeau!
> — C'est moi le berger, sur le sable… (22–3)

'La Fin' makes an apparently incongruous comparison between the contours of the seascape and those of a woman, although this is a way of showing the world as perceived through the consciousness of a virile sailor:

> — Voyez à l'horizon se soulever la houle;
> On dirait le ventre amoureux
> D'une fille de joie en rut, à moitié soûle… (31–3)

[16] 'Une étude sur Corbière', 6.

[17] As Philippe Hamon points out, description has something in common with tautology (favoured by Corbière) as both use repetition to intensify and to be precise. See *Introduction à l'analyse du descriptif*, 77.

[18] 'Pasteurs et troupeaux', *Les Contemplations*, *Œuvres poétiques*, ii. 708.

When static descriptions occur, they tend to be self-reflexive. This description of reflections in the sea from 'Le Bossu Bitor' incorporates eyes, as though the scene is gazing back at the describer:

> Parmi les yeux du brai flottant qui luit en plaque,
> Le ciel miroité semble une immense flaque. (19–20)

The same poem contains the condensed line 'Le soleil est noyé. — C'est le soir' (15), which verges on the surreal, but can be explained by an intertext: the metaphoric death of the sun recalls Baudelaire's 'Harmonie du soir', but the image is undercut by the prosaic paraphrase. The key visual referent of redness is buried, as the blood from the Baudelaire poem is only implied. Corbière often uses visual references to comic effect. To take an example from outside Brittany, 'Vésuves et C^{ie}' has a description which does not add up to a picture in the real world. A visit to Vesuvius revives memories of images which resemble the volcano, including a decorated screen:

> Bleu sur fond rose, avec ta Méditerranée
> Te renvoyant pendu, rose sur un champ bleu. (15–16)

The design may be highly stylized but effectively the reflection is a verbal inversion rather than a visual one. The fact that it is a physical impossibility reflects the poem's theme; the poet's internalized images and childhood memories of volcanic images are more vivid than the tourist sight itself.

'La Pastorale de Conlie' uses an implicit description of Géricault's painting *Le Radeau de la Méduse*:

> On eût dit un radeau de naufragés. — Misère —
> Nous crevions devant l'horizon.
> Nos yeux troubles restaient tendus vers une terre…
> Un cri nous montait : Trahison! (21–4)

This is a tableau describing the despair of Breton soldiers confined to their camp during the Franco-Prussian war, because Gambetta feared they might start a royalist uprising in the tradition of the *chouans*. The analogy between camp and shipwreck is surprising, but the backdrop is not to be read in a literal sense. In describing a known image, Corbière elevates the plight of the soldiers to the nobility of a large oil painting, and borrows the visual force of the contorted bodies which the reference

brings to mind. The cry 'trahison!' also hints at a parallel between the causes of the two débâcles, since both resulted from political decisions.[19]

Another way in which Corbière dissolves visual material into the verbal texture is by turning it into figurative language. His startling juxtapositions of things which could not coexist in reality often have a strong visual impact. Exaggerated precision is combined with imaginative metaphor in 'Matelots' to caricature the sailors:

> Ces anges mal léchés, ces durs enfants perdus!…
> Leur tête a du requin et du petit-Jésus. (45–6)

Angelet's useful analysis of Corbière's imagery shows how he creates surreal effects by placing the vehicle before the tenor in his metaphors, as in 'Bambine':[20]

> Bambine fait les cent pas.
> Un ange, une femme
> Le prend : — C'est ennuyeux ça, conducteur! Cessez! (18–19)

This is as disorientating as the myopic focus on details, and disrupts the forward movement of the lyric line. Corbière uses precisely those devices of condensation admired by Laforgue to render the visual problematic. Corbière's poetry is not devoid of plastic interest, but it actively problematizes the plastic. He does not theorize the visual any more than he theorizes any other aesthetic questions, but allusions scattered throughout his œuvre suggest that he was as preoccupied by the relation between word and image as many of his contemporaries.[21]

The closest Corbière comes to set-piece descriptions is in 'Paysage mauvais' and 'Nature morte'. His descriptions generally focus on people rather than landscape, but these two poems, which open 'Armor', establish a pictorial backdrop for the section. 'Paysage mauvais' launches straight into an impressionistic tableau:

> Sables de vieux os — Le flot râle
> Des glas : crevant bruit sur bruit…
> — Palud pâle, où la lune avale
> De gros vers, pour passer la nuit. (1–4)

[19] Although the ideological agenda in 1870 was the reverse of that in 1816, when the Restoration government had been blamed for choosing an incompetent captain for the *Méduse* on the grounds that he was a royalist.

[20] *La Poétique de Tristan Corbière*, 93.

[21] He was friends with painters and produced caricatures himself. The Paris poems refer more explicitly to the aesthetic and socio-historic position of the painter.

The fragmented nominal style creates a strong pictorial effect, as the landscape items are separated in small syntactic groups, which gives an impression of simultaneity. The quatrain amasses details without ordering them through syntactic subordination. The key words 'Sables' and 'Palud' are given without articles, and this telegraphic style is the verbal equivalent of a sketch. Huysmans comments that Corbière 'abusait des suppressions de verbes'.[22] Nominalization was in literary vogue during this period, as exemplified by the *écriture artiste* of the Goncourts, and was often associated with pictorial styles. Corbière experiments with different ways of foregrounding nouns, but here the compression is achieved by omitting verbs and juxtaposing noun phrases, as though he is noting impressions without any attention to the logical armature of syntax.[23]

The poem is a patchwork of allusions to Breton folklore, translated into the visual terms of a surreal tableau.[24] As David Scott points out, the sonnet form has diagrammatic potential, and here it structures the fragmented content: the quatrains set the background, and the tercets people it with creatures.[25] Breton folklore portrays the moon as man-eating, and its voraciousness is suggested by a vivid image in lines 3–4. The night setting and the unspecific adjectives of colour, 'pâle' in line 3 and 'blanche' in line 9, suggest a black and white picture. The 'où' construction of the first quatrain emphasizes the spatial dimension, and locates the moon in the marsh, which could literally mean it is reflected there. The possibility of a visual reflection is mirrored by the symmetry of sound patterning in line 3. The second quatrain opens with another 'où' construction, '— Calme de peste, où la fièvre | Cuit…', but it contrasts with the previous one, as the adverb 'où' is harder to read literally. It indicates a spatial relationship between items which are highly intangible, and the description tails off in suspension points. As in Verlaine, this evokes an atmosphere more than a clear-cut picture.

Whereas 'Paysage mauvais' suggests a direct imitation of reality, the title of the second poem in the diptych, 'Nature morte', denotes a

[22] *À rebours*, 306.

[23] The Brittany poems have fewer ambiguous noun constructions than the Paris poems.

[24] Aragon and Bonnin identify the references in their edition of *Les Amours jaunes*, 309–11.

[25] David Scott, *Pictorialist Poetics: Poetry and the Visual Arts in Nineteenth-Century France* (Cambridge University Press, 1988), 79.

still-life painting, suggesting that the poem is more aware of itself as a representation, and implicitly likening the act of artistic creation to death. In contrast to the fragmented 'Paysage mauvais', the winding syntax of 'Nature morte' carefully links the separate items, as though tracing an existing picture. The self-conscious attention to form is reflected in elevated terms like 'funèbre' and 'ténèbre' which contrast with the earthier 'damné', 'puante', and 'sale' in the previous poem. Whereas 'Paysage mauvais' drew its 'memento mori' image from the bones in their outdoor setting, 'Nature morte' sets up a bourgeois interior inhabited by an old man, and whose décor includes a Baudelairian reminder of mortality: a clock. The sense-impressions evoked in 'Nature morte' are largely sounds, but these too are described in visual terms, all overdetermined with terms for death.[26] The poem culminates in the death of an individual, possibly the old man, as it ends with the tautological 'Le défunt qui s'en va demain'. The doomed man is described as a corpse already, although he will not die until tomorrow. This could signify the time of vigil spent waiting for the soul to depart, but gives a strange effect of the future being projected into the present.

This last line sums up the 'death in life' topos which is the key to these poems. They look like mimetic descriptions, but the mythical references point to a symbolic interpretation, and the poems ultimately have a moral concern, being an expansion of the 'memento mori' topos, and semiotic patterns override the mimetic function. To use Riffaterre's terms, 'Nature morte' expands the hypogram of death in life given by its title, and 'Paysage mauvais' expands 'mauvais' by developing a series of images which are stereotypes connoting the sinister. Retrospectively, 'Paysage mauvais' is just as much an artificial construct as 'Nature morte', and follows the same basic structure. The first stanza of each focuses on time, the second on light, the third introduces a Breton personification of death, and the fourth concludes with the intense activity of a specific creature, as though life persists amidst the deathscape. The 'mélancolique' of the first poem is modulated into 'joyeux' in the second, reinforcing the theme of life persisting into death. This semiotic density is an extreme version of Corbière's strategy of dissolving visual material into the textual. The point of departure of the Brittany poems may have been observation, but 'Armor' and 'Gens de mer' dissolve the

[26] Jean-Marie Gleize has shown how 'Nature morte' uses sound patterning and interior rhyme to reinforce this insistence on the theme of death in 'Debout, là, traversé', *La Nouvelle Tour de feu*, 11–13 (1985), 125–9.

visible world into textual play, a tendency which is taken to extremes in the rest of his work.

DIALOGUE

The sense of orality is particularly immediate in 'Armor' and 'Gens de mer', and can be explained, more easily than in other sections, by simply picking out the many phrases which are borrowed from the oral register. However, this removes them from their poetic context and skates over the question of how Corbière creates an artistic image of spoken language. Incorporating oral material into poems is different from transposing visual material into verbal form. Visual details can only be included by way of words which signify visible referents, whereas oral fragments can literally be pasted into a literary text, as Barthes points out: 'si vous isolez une phrase d'un dialogue romanesque, rien ne peut a priori la distinguer d'une portion du langage ordinaire, c'est-à-dire du réel qui lui sert en principe de modèle'.[27] However, oral fragments are not self-contained specimens, but embody the consciousness of individual speakers and bring with them the traces of an interpersonal context.

Descriptions of people often use fragments of their own language as a way of extending the physical description, especially in 'Matelots':

> Ils sont mal culottés comme leurs brûle-gueules.
> Quand le roulis leur manque… ils se sentent rouler :
> — *À terre, on a beau boire, on ne peut désoûler!* (16–18)

Corbière paints with the living word; oral details are juxtaposed with visual details, and the intonation and elisions of popular speech are recorded, as in 'Cap'taine Ledoux', which is constructed entirely out of dialogue:

> Tiens, c'est l'cap'tain' Ledoux!… et quel bon vent vous pousse?
> — Un *bon frais*, ma'am' Galmiche, à fair'plier mon pouce. (1–2)

Hugo had used dialogue as one way of introducing everyday language and rhythms into poetry, and Corbière takes this much further.[28] The

[27] Roland Barthes, *Essais critiques*, Points (Paris: Seuil, 1964), 263.

[28] Carol de Dobay Rifelj compares Hugo's 'Les Pauvres Gens' to Corbière's 'La Balancelle' to show that 'Hugo's fisherman speaks mostly in standard, even somewhat

incorporation of popular language into verse is part of his realism, as emphasized by Angelet, who says of Corbière's sailors: 'Pour les peindre, Tristan juge indispensable de recourir à leur propre parlure, rejoignant en cela la technique romanesque des naturalistes.'[29] Lines like 'Qu'on te f…iche droit, quoi? pas dégôuté! Merci!…'[30] look like a transcription of genuinely oral fragments.[31] Such naturalistic dialogue is disconcerting because it is unexpected in poetry.

Dialogue is thus a means of importing material from a specific world, but also makes representations more open-ended, since giving characters a voice of their own is a way of showing what they are like rather than telling us. 'La Goutte' evokes a storm at sea almost entirely through juxtaposed fragments of dialogue. Direct speech forces the reader to construct the narrative and gives an impression of unmediated action:

> — Aux pompes, faillis chiens! — L'équipage fit — non. —
> — Le hunier! le hunier!…
> C'est un coup de canon,
> Un grand froufrou de soie à travers la tourmente.
> — Le hunier emporté — C'est la fin. Quelqu'un chante. (3–6)

The narrator's voice interrupts the exchange to report the loss of the topsail, but he describes it from the point of view of the sailors, noting the sound they would hear rather than explaining what it is. As a 'froufrou de soie' prototypically evokes the rustling silk of a woman's dress, he is also superimposing erotic imagery onto the scene of action, and thereby emphasizing the sailors' virility. The condensed language of line 5 thus has a dual perspective; although it is an intervention by the narrator, it is imprinted with the preoccupations of the characters. The introduction of the third person at this point underlines that the loss of the topsail is an event beyond the sailors' control. However, the narrative swiftly reverts to direct speech to convey their alarm. The violence of the sea is never described from a secure vantage point, but always from the midst of the drama. There is none of the *suave mari*

elevated French' whereas Corbière's sailors 'speak a tongue rich in popular constructions, argot, and sailors' terminology', *Word and Figure: The Language of Nineteenth-Century French Poetry* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1987), 42–3.

[29] *La Poétique de Tristan Corbière*, 36.

[30] 'Le Bossu Bitor', 112.

[31] As Genette emphasizes, strictly speaking mimesis can only apply to direct speech: 'La mimésis verbale ne peut être que mimésis du verbe. Pour le reste, nous n'avons et ne pouvons avoir que des degrés de diégésis.' *Figures III* (Paris: Seuil, 1972), 185–6.

magno, in which the observer enjoys the spectacle of disaster from a point of safety.

Using the voices of Breton people is realistic and also a way of creating a polyphonic texture. In 'La Goutte' it is impossible to isolate separate voices from the cacophony:

> — Tais-toi, Lascar! — Tantôt. — Le hunier emporté!…
> — Pare le foc, quelqu'un de bonne volonté!…
> — Moi. — Toi, lascar? Je chantais ça, moi, capitaine.
> — Va. — Non : la goutte avant? — Non, après. — Pas la peine:
> La grande tasse est là pour un coup… — Pour braver,
> Quoi! Mourir pour mourir et ne rien sauver… (7–12)

As well as breaking up the authoritative linear direction of discourse, polyphony incorporates multiple perspectives. Sometimes Parisian manners are juxtaposed with sailors' speech, and the contrasting languages brought up against each other in dialogue. 'Bambine' motivates this by having a Breton sailor take urban passengers on a pleasure trip. 'Matelots' does the reverse, attacking the artificial theatrical representations of sailors accepted by urban audiences, and showing the real sailors on land, where they are not in their element, since they disembark only if they are wounded or if there is an opportunity for revelry. As well as citing the landlubbers' theatrical view of the sailors, it incorporates the sailor's view of the landlubbers in lines 29–30. An observer gapes at the deformities of the sailor's body, only to have each item wittily countered by a defensive sailor:

> — Un œil en moins. — Et vous, l'avez-vous en plus?
> — La fièvre-jaune. — Et bien, et vous, l'avez-vous rose?
> Une balafre. — Ah, c'est signé!… C'est quelque chose! (80–3)

This dialogue is stylized rather than noted verbatim; it sums up the conflicting opinions of the outsider recoiling at the scars and the sailor's pride in them. It recalls the dialogue of 'Ça?', in which the ignorant audience's attempts to categorize the book are all thrown back at them.

Not only do fragments of speech hint at an interpersonal context, but they are also in dialogue with the literary discourse into which they are inserted. Rather than seeing dialogue as 'real speech' pasted into poetic discourse, we need to read the poems as fictional constructs of which the dialogue is an integral part. As Bakhtin points out, a literary text involves more than one linguistic consciousness: 'S'il n'y avait pas cette seconde conscience représentante, cette seconde volonté de représentation, nous verrions non point une *image* du langage,

mais simplement un *échantillon* du langage d'autrui, authentique ou factice.'[32] Corbière articulates the concerns of the Breton people in ways they could not express themselves. He uses their discourse as 'other', but rather than deriding it he conveys its directness with sophisticated self-awareness. For instance, 'Cap'taine Ledoux' stages a dialogue in a bar between a widow and a sailor, in which the widow reproaches her child for sitting on the captain's knee. Without any authorial comment the poem conveys the child's need for a father figure, and thus the tragic impact of seafaring on a family. The poem is meticulously realistic in its transcription of the bar's sign and of the elisions of popular speech, and yet it is stylized as all the rhymes echo the [u] sound of Ledoux.[33] Another poem which transforms the sailors' language into poetic form is 'Le Mousse', a dialogue between the eponymous ship's boy and a boy whose father died at sea but whose ambition is to be a sailor too. The discourse is pared down to the bare minimum, and the sonnet form reflects the extreme formal control. The child's language reflects the fact that he is old before his time, having had to fill the shoes of an absent father. He says 'C'est moi son mari sur la terre' and refers to his family in the terms we would expect of a breadwinner, labelling his younger siblings as 'deux petits'. The language is also stylized, as the poem has internal patterns which would not be found in direct speech, for instance the idea of the sea as deathbed:

> En découchant d'avec ma mère,
> Il a couché dans les brisants… (3–4)

The imagery is drawn from the everyday, but rather than faithfully imitating the diction of a child, the poem condenses childlike simplicity into poetry. The bald statement of fact, including specification of the only remains which were washed up, 'son garde-pipe et son sabot', and the absence of emotive vocabulary, all add to the resonance.

Similarly, 'Lettre du Mexique' stylizes the linguistic awkwardness of a sailor writing to inform a family that their young son has died at sea. Although the letter is a written form, the repetition of 'ça', and expressions like 'C'est bien sûr' and 'J'aurais donné ma peau joliment sans façon' are oral. The poet's voice is barely heard as he is no more than

[32] Mikhail Bakhtin, *Esthétique et théorie du roman*, trans. Daria Olivier (Paris: Gallimard, 1978), 176.

[33] Capitaine Ledoux is the name of a slave trader in Mérimée's tale 'Tamango', who is massacred in a revolt aboard his ship. The suggestion of danger and cruelty thus underpins the banter of this poem.

an organizing presence, juxtaposing fragments of simple discourse in such a way as to charge them with meaning. The hallucinatory image of angels present at the boy's death is visionary, but true to the superstitious beliefs of the sailors. Statements like 'ce mal-là n'a pas de raison' baldly express human helplessness, and the avoidance of trite consolation only drives home the pain of grief. The brusque tone reflects the harshness of this life—repeatedly stressing that death is an everyday phenomenon only underlines its violence. The letter form heightens the impact, as it places the reader in the position of the recipient of bad news.

These three poems evoke the tragic impact of the sea on families, focusing on those who lose husbands, fathers, and children at sea. We are given fragments of situations which show the causes of their suffering. The author expresses compassion by withdrawing rather than vociferously proclaiming his sympathy in a Hugolian fashion. The poems combine the simple sentences, direct speech, and episodic anecdote, which are characteristic of popular forms, with a more complex artistry. Corbière borrows the language of the people he describes to bring their stories to life. Bakhtin shows that the living voice embodies a concrete consciousness, so the thought of an individual is 'drawn into an event, becomes itself part of the event and takes on that special quality of an "idea-feeling" '.[34] The use of the 'embodied word' is part of Corbière's verbal precision, and also contributes a sense of affect. When Corbière quotes the speech of Breton people, it often contains evaluative words like 'bon' and 'bien' (as in 'La Rapsode foraine' above). It is characteristic of popular songs and tales that they use terms of evaluation rather than description.[35] Angelet remarks on the deliberate banality of Corbière's epithets,[36] and it is their ambiguous double intonation which gives these ordinary words their poetic force. Popular forms embody the ideology of the society from which they spring, and use these evaluative words wholeheartedly with the assumption that the community shares their judgement. Corbière uses them from outside in a more distanced way, so a critical consciousness inhabits the simple vocabulary. The individual estranged from the community uses this discourse in a double-voiced, aestheticized way. Dialogue is appropriated by speakers to different degrees. At one extreme direct speech is added as a disruptive trimming, and at the other it provides the basis for whole poems which create

[34] *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, ed. and trans. Emerson, 10.
[35] Philippe Hamon, *Introduction à l'analyse du descriptif*, 41.
[36] *La Poétique de Tristan Corbière*, 108.

artistic images of oral language. Playing on modes of indirect speech is a novelistic technique, but it feeds poetry by introducing ambiguity and condensation. Before examining in more detail the ways in which Corbière plays on the distance between the artist and his borrowed discourses, it is worth pausing to consider the impact of spoken dialogue on the visual descriptions.

VOICE-IMAGES

Corbière uses the formal structures of poetry to establish equivalences between the different senses, by juxtaposing visual details and oral quotations in sequence. The syntax lines up technical terms for nautical equipment with clichés and fragments of popular speech. Hamon points out that in classical aesthetics, 'le détail peut faire le même effet fâcheux qu'une ''citation'', il est toujours senti, peu ou prou, comme un élément autonome, ou étranger'.[37] Similarly, David Scott argues that Baudelaire uses dialogue as a literary equivalent to the bizarre juxtaposition of visual motifs.[38] Corbière uses both oral and visual scraps as though they were similar sorts of bric-a-brac, to create a heteroclite texture. Sometimes samples of language are themselves concrete objects, as when Corbière inserts transcriptions of shop signs as subtitles, giving a realistic twist to the practice of using literary quotations as epigraphs.[39] Corbière's verse is encrusted with visual and oral fragments which are rarely connected by the armature of syntax but may be linked by puns or other internal patterns. The development of pictorial techniques in the nineteenth century coincided with the emergence of increasingly anti-rhetorical styles, marked by a changing use of punctuation. David Scott shows how dashes are often used in nineteenth-century writing to pick out details.[40] Corbière more often uses them to indicate dialogue, but in 'Paysage mauvais' and the cabaret description from 'Le Bossu Bitor' they also signal visual details. Where one would expect pictorial language to be directed towards its referential object, Corbière's visual descriptions get caught up in the dialogic style, and his images are spoken. He also dissolves the pictorial into the oral by harnessing the intonational force of language.

[37] *Introduction à l'analyse du descriptif*, 17.
[38] *Pictorialist Poetics*, 65.
[39] As in 'Cap'taine Ledoux' and 'Le Novice en partance et sentimental'.
[40] *Pictorialist Poetics*, 101.

These techniques are evident in 'Au vieux Roscoff', a celebration of the small port where Corbière spent much of his brief adulthood. The description is cast as a lullaby, constructed out of exclamations addressed to the place, so it is foregrounded as a communicative speech act rather than just conveying information about the place. Parts of it have a strong visual impact, such as the description of the rigging cutting up the sky:

> Où battaient-ils, ces pavillons,
> Écharpant ton ciel en haillons!… (25–6)

The observer describes what he sees is there, rather than what he knows is there, such that the sky and cloth appear to be of one material, as in an impressionist painting. The idiom 'battre pavillon' is fragmented so its components regain their original meanings, bringing out the violence of the verb 'battre'. The imagery of battle is underlined by 'écharpant' and continues into the following line, '— Dors au ciel de plomb sur tes dunes…', since one of the meanings of 'plomb' is lead shot. However, Corbière is also playing on the word's more peaceful connotations: 'ciel de plomb' plays on the expression 'soleil de plomb', to evoke a blazing sun, and also implies a 'sommeil de plomb', a deep sleep. The line reads like two utterances of different sorts grafted on to each other: a command to sleep and a description of sky and sand. The imperative and the image are held together by the verbal trickery of 'ciel de plomb' but are not joined in any clear grammatical sense, as if they have not been fully assimilated into a unified style. It is as though a battle between the oral and the visual is causing the language to strain at the seams.

In contrast to the nominalization which is rife elsewhere, 'Au vieux Roscoff' verbalizes description. It collapses the opposition between description and action, by systematically combining the two apparently contradictory codes of sleeping and fighting. Paradoxically, the speaker lulls the place to sleep by reminding it of past battles, so a historical dimension is insinuated into the description. The 'vieux nid à corsaires' (1–2) has a double meaning; the figurative sense of a den of thieves gives the theme of the poem, but the lullaby form picks up on the connotations of infancy and security in 'nest'. While the intimate address to the second person, reinforced by homely adjectives like 'vieux' and 'bon', creates a cosy atmosphere, the action escalates from violent storms and drunken revelry to full-scale battle.

Orality contributes to Corbière's visionary quality by injecting affective force into his visual descriptions. Inconsequential oral asides are often

rhymed with key nouns, for instance 'quoi' with 'noroî',[41] 'peut-être' with 'fenêtre',[42] and 'jupon' with 'la vie a du bon'.[43] Corbière even uses zeugma to yoke visual notations and exclamations, as in 'Le Bossu Bitor': 'Il fait noir, il est gris. — L'or n'est qu'une chimère!' (819). The first hemistich telescopes black and grey, as 'il fait noir' is an impersonal construction describing night, and the parallel 'il est gris' is a third-person statement that the character Bitor ('il') is drunk. The second part of the line appears to introduce a third colour, gold, but this is a quotation of proverbial wisdom, apparently quoted by Bitor to justify his desire to spend money, and which retrospectively explains his intoxication. The ellipsis reflects his excitement, and the fragmented line jumps between this inner consciousness and description of the context. This is a poetic counterpart of Flaubert's 'unified texture' in which the novelist 'merged external events, mental activity, and description in a stylistic continuum'.[44]

This technique of fusing the oral and the visual is most marked in the visionary passages addressing extreme subjects like suffering and revolt. 'Cris d'aveugle' tackles suffering in a monologue by a blind person whose primal cries recapture the power of vision through the force of speech. The loss of outward vision increases inner vision, which is expressed through fragments of a specifically Breton setting. This compression makes for what can be described as voice-images. The cry of pain is objectified into a chain of hallucinatory and nightmarish images, so the sensation is translated into something tangible. The poem uses the existing melody of a 'complainte', and the pounding insistence of its masculine rhymes reinforces the theme of violence. A whole spectrum of devices are used to sculpt the cry, including repetition, rhythm, and wordplay. The complete lack of punctuation depersonalizes the utterance. Normally punctuation is used to suggest intonation, but here strength of feeling is forged into more permanent static images. The poem draws on diverse sense experience; breaking the world into a flurry of colours, sounds, and pain, disconnected from their context and causes. The speaker seems to be noting sensations as they assail him, recording his trauma in a series of images and sounds. However, the subjective outpouring is carefully constructed, and the incantatory power of language is used to suggest a realm between life and death. The paradoxical

[41] 'Le Novice en partance et sentimental', 70–2.
[42] Ibid. 105–7.
[43] 'La Rapsode foraine', 222–4.
[44] Houston, *French Symbolism and the Modernist Movement*, 41.

opening line 'l'œil tué n'est pas mort' recalls 'le défunt s'en va demain' of 'Nature morte'. It relies on the repetition of key elements such as the eyes, which are metaphorically echoed in a variety of terms denoting holes (they are variously 'deux trous' and 'bénitiers ardents'; the motif is echoed in 'sabord', 'forge d'enfer'). Each stanza begins and ends with a six-syllable couplet rhymed on [ɔʀ] (all echoing the sound of 'mort'). In each stanza the second couplet recombines elements of the first one so as to give it a more negative twist. For instance, 'Pardon de prier fort | Seigneur si c'est le sort' (55–60) becomes 'Pardon de crier fort | Seigneur contre le sort' (59–60). Religious imagery, which frequently features in delirious utterances, here underscores the impression of a deranged subjectivity, and is inextricably bound up with the Breton setting.

'Le Naufrageur' takes up the hammering repetition and hellish imagery of 'Cris d'aveugle' to evoke a contrasting experience: the action of a glamorized criminal. It describes the activity of wreckers, first justifying it by referring to the desperation of the 'pauvre gens', and then depicting its drama in visionary terms. The speaker is the eponymous wrecker, who harmonizes with his elemental storm-torn setting. What he sees opens up a visionary sphere, as he himself states: 'J'ai vu dans mes yeux, dans mon rêve' (2) and 'Moi je vois profond dans la nuit, sans voir!' (12). This visionary dimension is conveyed in a compressed language which he would not use himself, although the plethora of oral signs give it the immediacy of an utterance produced in the midst of the storm:

> L'enfer fait l'amour. — Je ris comme un mort —
> Sautez sous le *Hû!*… le *Hû* des rafales,
> Sur les *noirs taureaux sourds, blanches cavales!*
> Votre écume à moi, *cavales d'Armor!*
> Et vos crins au vent!… Je ris comme un mort — (24–8)

The intonation of the words links with their sense to create concise and suggestive voice-images. The command to spur on a horse has become a noun: 'le Hû', as though it were an object. Images with a strong visual impact are compressed into little yelps with a powerful affective force. Just as conventional poetic images gain much of their force from sound patterning and rhythm, Corbière's gain much from the affect of the implied intonation. Figurative language is not just visual, but the oral 'Hû' has become metaphorical. If imagistic language is derived from visual description, Corbière derives a similar written image of orality from speech. Imagery borrows the visual to describe other things figuratively, and Corbière uses the oral to produce similar

effects. Voice-images are central to his visionary idiom which conveys a sense of what Pound identifies as 'that force of romance which is a quite real and apparently ineradicable part of our life'.[45]

This harnessing of orality means that consciousness is imprinted on all Corbière's descriptions. The texts are full of signs of voice, but these cannot be attributed to a single originating authority. Corbière's identification with the Breton people is conveyed stylistically rather than being presented by a first person who is unequivocally one of them. 'Le Naufrageur' ironically quotes the sort of formula used by a witness to assert the veracity of a yarn: 'Si ce n'était pas vrai — Que je crève!' (1), but the compression comes from the author and not the hero. Just as Corbière represents private emotions objectively by making them disordered and strange, so he approaches the alien world of seafarers by forging a vigorous style to make it seem vividly real, rather than claiming to speak from personal experience.

CLASH OF CULTURES

Corbière stylizes Brittany by fragmenting visual description and speaking through the voices of characters, and together these strategies give his writing great intensity. Since we are aware that this world is presented with an aesthetic distance, it follows that there must be signs of the artist responsible for the patterning. Some poems delineate the quoted voices clearly from the quoting ones, with the result that the narrator's discourse is exposed as a code in itself. Speakers often adopt an exaggerated version of literary discourse to undermine it from within, and the intrusions of speech from the Breton people only highlight the artifice of this self-conscious literary pose. For instance, in the self-mocking elegy 'À mon cotre Le Négrier' the speaker is a *littérateur* borrowing the discourse of sailors to bid farewell to a pleasure boat which he is selling. The boat represents the carefree part of self which aspires to sea adventure, but the knowledgeable use of nautical terms is incongruous, given that the speaker is no hardened mariner. This speaker who can only play at being a sailor is perhaps the one who comes closest to Corbière the author,

[45] 'He preceded and thereby escaped that spirit or that school which was to sentimentalize over ugliness with a more silly sentimentality than the early romanticists had shown toward "the beauties of nature". 'The Approach to Paris', *New Age*, 13 (2 Oct. 1913), 663.

and is presented as a figure of fun. The poem juxtaposes cosmopolitan refinement with descriptions of the elemental setting. A similar strategy is used in 'Le Phare', which expands the topos of lighthouse as phallic image through a series of classical references, quotations from Musset, and an absurd description of installing 'Madame' in this abode, which all seem incongruous against the rugged coastal backdrop. It also exposes the inauthenticity of Breton Romantic poetry, by parodying 'Le Phare' by Hyacinthe du Pontavice de Heussey, which solemnly describes the lighthouse in inflated language such as:

> Il est seul dans son calme et sa virilité,
> Un contre tous, debout comme la vérité![46]

Corbière's version takes the priapic imagery literally to mock it from within.

> Il se mate et rit de sa rage,
> Bandant à bloc;
> Fier bout de chandelle sauvage
> Plantée au roc! (9–12)

It concludes with a literal deflation: 'l'érection du phare | N'y tiendrait pas…' (59–60).

The fact that the narrator's discourse is merely a conventional code is particularly obvious when he adopts the conventions of a recognizable genre. No two poems follow the same model, and Corbière reworks a variety of genres, including epic ('Le Bossu Bitor'), portrait ('Le Rénégat'), and song (the fragmented sea shanty 'Aurora'). Despite their immediacy, the poems in both 'Armor' and 'Gens de mer' filter reality through existing interpretations. 'Gens de mer' includes sailor poems in the style of La Landelle, and draws on the world of seafaring adventure depicted in novels by Corbière's father.

Since so many narrators self-consciously parody poetic style, it is difficult to locate the artist. Indeed, the poet is often diffused, and recognizes himself in outsiders. A telling example occurs in the portrait 'Le Rénégat' in which a protean buccaneer is described as an 'artiste de proie'. The renegade mirrors the artist, but the rapacious image suggests that he might also fight back; he is not merely a passive observer but actively preys on subject matter and thus participates in the brutality of the natural world. Other characteristics of the renegade

[46] *La Poésie Bretonne au XIXe siècle*, ed. Joseph Rousse (Paris: Lethielleux, 1895), 200.

could equally describe the poet: the transgressive declamation 'Ça mange de l'humain, de l'or, de l'excrément' (13) literalizes the poetic process of depicting all kinds of subject matter. Whereas Baudelaire wrote of turning mud into gold,[47] this raptor-like artist is offered raw materials which are even more abject, and he devours them all indiscriminately, which is a metaphor for the poet's cannibalization of the discourse of others.

'Le Douanier' goes so far as to introduce a poet persona into the scene and to describe his relationship with a coastguard rooted in his clifftop environment. This venerable figure is forced to retire because of administrative rationalization, and Corbière ironically paraphrases the marching orders issued by bureaucrats: '— Va, lézard démodé!' (80). The poet effusively celebrates the coastguard, who belongs in a rapidly vanishing world referred to as a 'songe passé', and this nostalgia is expressed in dreamlike language. The poem ostensibly articulates a realist aesthetic, with the poet describing his ambition to immortalize the weathered customs officer: 'je vais t'empailler' [. . .] Et te coller ici, boucané de mes rimes' (3–5). However, the analogy between art and taxidermy is ironic and the speaker is mocking the ambitions of realism. His poem is a fiction which plays on existing forms—it contains an inset song and reworks the Hugolian theme of the humble figure as seer. The coastguard is described in ironically precious terms, and the flamboyant imagery exaggerated to the point of ridicule:

> Telle que, sans rosée, une sombre pervenche
> Se replie, en closant sa corolle qui penche…
> Telle, sans contrebande, on voit se replier
> Le capote gris-bleu, corolle du douanier!… (84–7)

The disparity between the coarse subject matter and overblown elegiac tone is comic. The elegist is represented within the poem, observing the coastguard, and informs us that their relationship was characterized by communion and identification, but an idealized description of the pair at work shows the coastguard doing his sums while the poet writes verse, and it is clear that they speak utterly different languages. The poet likens the coastguard to a philosopher, and elevates his sums to an existential formula, describing them as 'l'ennui contemplatif divisé par lui-même' (89), but this is exaggerated self-consciousness, and the poem is really showing how the poet is alien in this world. By describing the Breton

[47] 'Tu m'as donné ta boue et j'en ai fait de l'or', *Œuvres complètes*, ii. 192.

people from the point of view of the man of letters, Corbière makes the literary discourse as much an object as he does the oral language of the sailors. The so-called authorial discourse is no more a direct expression of the author than that of the sailors. The author is not to be found in any one language but lies between them, as Bakhtin points out: 'L'auteur [. . .] est introuvable sur les divers plans du langage: il se trouve au centre où s'organise l'intersection des plans'.[48] Corbière is a ventriloquist who adopts multiple voices without fully inhabiting any single one. As Bakhtin says: 'The writer is a person who knows how to work language while remaining outside of it; he has the gift of indirect speech.'[49] Corbière shows the limits of particular styles by juxtaposing different ones in an attempt to penetrate reality. The true meaning of his poems lies in the relationships between the styles.

It is difficult to pin down the speaker of any given utterance and none is totally authentic, since the artist's commentary is often exaggerated to the point of self-parody, and the characters' speech is stylized. Above all, the voices of artist and characters constantly interfere with each other to produce a range of hybrid utterances. This incessant fusion of voices means that the world is often described from a variety of perspectives simultaneously. It is retinted and qualified in every line, building up an overall picture of a complex world-view. In his short introduction to Corbière, written long before the wave of critical interest launched by Sonnenfeld in the 1960s, Turnell astutely identifies Corbière's 'dédoublement' as the key to his poetry, which he describes as the 'sense that we are regarding the same experience simultaneously under two aspects'.[50] He argues that Corbière expresses simple emotions but complicates them by commenting on them. This division is enacted in the Brittany poems, in which an elemental world is perceived through the optic of modern consciousness. Turnell suggests that Corbière's poetry represents a return to nature as a reaction against sophisticated urban poetry, but presents the two worlds of feelings (Breton peasants and sceptical observer) as equally real.[51] It is the sum of stylistic effects which I have identified that produces this sense of an overarching double perspective.

[48] *Esthétique et théorie du roman*, 408.

[49] Quoted by Tzvetan Todorov, *Mikhail Bakhtin: The Dialogic Principle*, trans. Wlad Godzich (Manchester University Press, 1984), p. vii.

[50] G. M. Turnell, 'Introduction to the Study of Tristan Corbière', *The Criterion*, 15 (1936), 393–417 (398).

[51] Ibid. 400–4.

'LE BOSSU BITOR': NARRATIVE

Many of the devices discussed above are novelistic, so it is worthwhile examining Corbière's narrative poetry, which offers the scope for more sustained experimentation with dialogue and points of view, and of which the best example is 'Le Bossu Bitor'. It tells the story of a hunchback sailor who permits himself an annual trip ashore to enjoy the brothels, like all the other sailors. One year he fails to return from his expedition and is later found dead; the events leading up to the fatal event are described in graphic detail. Much of the poem's irony stems from disparities between the epic genre, conventionally reserved for elevated subject matter, and the anti-hero Bitor. The humour cuts both ways, for the hunchback is mocked for his crudity, but the ribald humour from within the sailor's world also undercuts the artifice of the epic. Corbière's realism and irony contrasts with mythical tales of sailors seeking love between land and sea, such as the *The Flying Dutchman*. There is humour in the use of heroic discourse to describe a hunchback creeping out to pay for his pleasure, and Corbière plays up the comic theatrical motif of an unprepossessing customer selecting his *Grâce de corvée* with delectation (150–1). However, Bitor's world is a brutal one in which the fittest survive; when he contemplates the choice of girls in the cabaret he is described as a 'chauve-souris fixant les albatros en proie' (166), which suggests that he is doomed from the start and that there is tragedy in his fate.

Corbière plays with the traditional form of French narrative poetry: long passages of alexandrines with a predominance of *rimes plates*, much used by the Romantics. Corbière attacks these predecessors, and his narrative differs from theirs by refusing idealism and fragmenting the authorial voice. Laforgue rightly emphasizes the condensation of the poem:

> C'est raconté avec une PRODIGIEUSE épuration (Bitor), c'est condensé, ça pétille, tout est à prendre, la rime ne compte pas comme rime, on ne la sent pas. — Il fait de la peine à voir compter ses syllabes, alterner ses distiques par masculines et féminines, scander ses césures — que n'a-t-il fait cela en prose — c'est impossible à chanter, ce texte.[52]

The language has a staccato quality and, although some periods extend across several lines of verse, there is a predominance of end-stopped lines.

[52] 'Une étude sur Corbière', 12.

When successive lines all initiate new syntactic structures, a sense of agitation is produced, which often reflects Bitor's restlessness, as in lines 73–7). The accumulation of short snippets of speech, often separated by suspension points, enables Corbière to retain the prosaic word order of speech whilst ensuring the metrical autonomy of his alexandrines, as in:

> — Bon. Tu m'en conduiras une… et propre! combien?…
> — Tire ton sac. — Voilà. — Parole! il a du bien!… (117–18)

In narrative verse the rhymes are often less prominent than in shorter poems, but 'Le Bossu Bitor' further foregrounds line-endings with colourful rhymes such as 'cossuses' with 'bossuses' (119–20).

The overarching narrative provides a distinct structure; the poem describes the setting, dramatizes the key events, and concludes with a retrospective summary of the outcome. There are changes in pace, and description and action alternate. Suspense is generated; in the fourth section we do not see what Bitor does on his escapade and are not told why he returns in a sorrowful mood, but this is retrospectively explained as a subsequent escapade is evoked in graphic detail. Gaps in the narration puzzle the reader, for instance we are not told exactly how Bitor dies. First we are shown Bitor's habit from the point of view of others, then we are shown his final escapade as a singular event from a point of view close to the protagonist himself.

Laforgue asks 'que n'a-t-il fait cela en prose'. Rather than following the conventions of the narrative poem and using poetic rhetoric to tell a story, Corbière exploits more novelistic techniques, by playing on the artifice of the narrative voice. In fiction, narrators vary between being unobtrusive in those works which aspire to objectivity (projecting a 'maximum d'information et un minimum d'informateur'),[53] and being highly subjective in texts which aim to represent the narrative act itself realistically (parading the limited perspective and consciousness of the speaker). Both of these strategies are merely conventions, and, by repeatedly alternating between them, 'Le Bossu Bitor' emphasizes their conventionality.

There is objectivity in the way the narrator describes events from Bitor's physical perspective, following him in time and space, for instance describing what Bitor sees as he enters the bar:

[53] Genette, *Figures III*, 187.

> Une porte s'ouvrit. C'est la salle allumée.
> Silhouettes grouillant à travers la fumée. (123–4)

Commentators have spoken of the realism of the subject matter but the realism of presentation is also important, as the shifting incompletion reflects the sensation of real life. Bitor is constantly being described from slightly different points of view, and these jumps do not reflect 'soubresauts de conscience' as in the more lyrical poems, but have a narrative function. Abundant use of the present tense gives an impression of immediacy very different from the style of much Romantic narrative poetry. Life only becomes a story retrospectively once it has ended, but although Bitor's story ends in death and invites just such a teleological treatment, it is told as if in the process of unfolding. When the narrator withdraws in this way, Bitor's own point of view is conveyed more immediately.

However, even when the narrator is closely tailing his character, he constantly projects his own subjectivity into the telling. The narrator is not declaiming retrospectively, and it is hard to separate his narration from the narrated events. At times he is physically present in his story, as when Bitor heads down the backstreets of the port. The question '— Qui va là?' (91) sounds like a cry from the patrol mentioned in line 37, but it is answered from outside by the narrator with an ironic allusive description of Bitor, comparing him to a series of historical hunchback figures. Lines 101–3 could be read as though the narrator were literally following Bitor, in which case they are ironic, or as though Bitor were talking himself through events:

> — Va donc Paillasse! Et le trousse-galant t'emporte!
> Tiens : c'est là!… C'est un mur — Heurte encor!… C'est la porte:
> As-tu peur! —
> Il écoute… Enfin : un bruit de clefs. (101–3)

This demonstrates that the question of irony cannot be dissociated from that of voice; one cannot merely categorize each phrase as genuine or ironic if it is not clear who is meant to be speaking.

The narrative act is foregrounded as a performance, and there are frequent marks of a personal narrator; the most obtrusive being the overt use of the first person:

> … J'y sens je ne sais quoi d'assez mélancolique,
> Comme un vague fumet d'holocauste à l'antique… (67–8)

Attention is drawn to the narrator through the self-mocking affectation of poetic language. Other marks are interjections such as '— mystère! —'

(28), a clichéd narratorial comment creating suspense. Phrases like 'C'était la fin' (69) imply the control of a speaking voice which is not just showing events but ordering them. These signs of voice are often ironic; and no more than vestiges of an absent authoritative narrator. Furthermore, the narrator's point of view is far from constant. Generalized statements such as 'Tout le monde a pourtant quelque bosse en la tête…' (51) imply a certain omniscience but elsewhere the narrator's authority is limited, as when the explanation given for Bitor's deformity is the sailor's own rather than a narratorial summary (12–14). The disclaimer 'il disait' implies a sceptical attitude to this source, especially as the Chilean earthquake seems an uncharacteristically romantic explanation for his handicap.

Corbière constantly gives a voice to characters within the poem, and direct speech forces the reader to construct the narrative. The most intense use of direct speech coincides with the narrative climax in the brothel scene, highlighting its power as a dramatic resource. Elsewhere, fragments of dialogue are used to express attitudes to Bitor from voices other than the narrator:

> — Tiens : Bitor disparu. — C'est son jour de sabbats
> Il en a pour deux nuits : réglé comme un compas.
> — C'est un sorcier pour sûr… —
> Aucun n'aurait pu dire. (57–9)

Corbière blurs the origin of these anonymous speakers, and it is not clear whether they said or merely thought these things, whether the author is quoting them or verbalizing their mindset. This is naturalistic compared with Hugo's use of dialogue in *La Légende des siècles*.

This uncertainty over exactly who is speaking dominates the poem. The narrator fuses with his characters in a passage describing a typical night on the town for the sailors:

> Entendez-vous là-bas, dans les culs-de-sac louches,
> Roucouler leur chanson ces tourtereaux farouches!…
>
> — Chantez! La vie est courte et drôlement cordée!…
> Hâle à toi, si tu peux, une bonne bordée
> À jouer de la fille, à jouer du couteau…
> Roucoulez mes Amours! Qui sait : demain!… tantôt…
>
> … Tantôt, tantôt… la ronde en écrémant la ville,
> Vous soulage en douceur quelque traînard tranquille
> Pour le coller en vrac, léger échantillon,
> Bleu saignant et vainqueur, au clou. — Tradition. — (31–40)

Lines 31–2 seem to originate from within the story, as if the speaker is pointing to events at the moment they are happening. However, he is distanced from the sailors both spatially, by 'là-bas', and through his ironic attitude—the tender 'roucouler' and 'tourtereaux' are undercut by their assonance with the more dubious 'louches' and 'farouches'. 'Entendez-vous' seems to be spoken by a narrator situated close to the events. Lines 33–6 are more ambiguous; the words seem to be the sailor's song, though the *carpe diem* motif directed at an unknown second person has the effect of reaching out to the narratee in the same way as line 31, and thus blends with the narrator's discourse. The recurrence of the verb 'roucouler' seems ironic but it is not clear where the irony stems from. The sailor himself might be using the word ironically to mock the idea of sentimental love, or the narrator might be juxtaposing the sailor's brute instincts with cooing lovesickness to ironic effect. In any case, the amorous adventure culminates in the drunken sailor's arrest, an inevitable conclusion whose messiness is described with glee. This satisfaction is both a sign of the sailor's pride, and of the narrator's own confidence that he too is a man of the world. Irony stems as much from the sailors' cynical view of love as from the narrator's ironic handling of his characters. This ambiguity over the identity of the speaker and the source of discursive effects brings the narrator close to the sailors and suggests sympathy with them.

The poem itself undermines the idea of a narrator incorporating fragments of unpoetic natural language into a poetic discourse. Although the rhythm is frequently dislocated, rhymes are foregrounded in the very sections dominated by dialogue, often to burlesque effect, Mary-Saloppe uses a range of figurative language to describe Bitor (195–200), whereas the narrator only contributes the bald statement 'C'était l'heureux Bitor' (200). Although Mary-Saloppe's language is coarse, it is rich and expressive, demonstrating that the language of the characters is more than just local colour. The fact that the direct speech is quoted in full rather than merely recounted draws attention to the way it is said rather than what is said (which sounds suspiciously like a definition of poetry). The apparently non-poetic is paradoxically a source of poetic effect, and this tension reflects the fault-line between the realistic and the defamiliarizing which runs through the whole poem. Corbière does not just incorporate samples of the speech of others, but uses the rhythms of speech in the texture of the poem as a whole. The language of the sailors is partly used in direct speech, partly appropriated in the discourse of the narrator, and partly in a confusion of the two. Many passages in which

the voice cannot be identified are a sort of paraphrase by the narrator of the spoken language of the characters. For instance, the girls' services are described in a chorus:

> — Du velours pour frotter à cru leur cuir tanné!
> Et du fard, pour torcher leur baiser boucané!…
> À leurs ceintures d'or, faut ceinture dorée! (159–61)

This is presented as their dialogue, yet the idiom seems to have been refined by a representing consciousness, as though two or more voices coexist in the discourse. A similar effect is apparent in:

> — Charivari! — Pour qui? — Quelle ronde infernale
> Quel paquet crevé roule en hurlant dans la salle?… (193–4)

The use of punctuation, exclamation, and questions suggests this is a quotation of dialogue uttered within the turmoil of events, yet the description of the couple seems to come from outside the scene. It is as if the narrator is voicing for them the experience that they could not express themselves, whilst remaining close to their vocabulary.

The narrator also uses a variety of different languages within his own discourse, so that stylistic shifts are no guide to changes in voice. At times the voice of the narrator is clearly demarcated: the description of Bitor's attire is self-consciously produced by a man of letters who cannot resist a playful allusion to Gautier:[54]

> … Un pantalon jadis *cuisse-de-nymphe-émue*,
> Couleur tendre à mourir!… et trop tôt devenue
> *Merdoie* … excepté dans les plus *rose-d'amour*,
> Gardiens de la couleur, gardiens du pur contour… (77–80)

This contrasts with Bitor's direct speech, such as the exclamation '— Ah! c'est que ce n'est pas, non plus, tous les jours fête!…' (82), a popular saying consisting entirely of monosyllables. However, the narrator's interpolation 'Enfin il s'est lavé, gratté — rude toilette!' (81) is closer to Bitor's turn of phrase, and the narrator is hardly distinguishable from his character here. The question of distance is highlighted by the italicized words. These are foregrounded typographically, suggesting they are being quoted or that the speaker is distancing himself from them. In 'Le Bossu Bitor', they occur both in passages attributed to the narrator and in dialogue, and it is uncertain which voice is expressing the distance.

[54] Gautier,'L'Art': 'Lutte avec le carrare | Avec le paros dur | Et rare | Gardiens du contour pur.'

Corbière undercuts the contrast between an elevated narrator's voice and less poetic dialogue found in Hugo's narrative poetry. The narrator cannot be located either as an identifiable voice or as the source of a characteristic discourse, and incorporates citations from other discourses into his own, such as appeals to universal wisdom like 'Car chacun sait qu'en mer un bossu porte chance…' (9) and popular sayings like Bitor's use of 'ce n'est pas tous les jours fête' (82). This variety in the narrator's language even within short stretches means dialogue is not the only method of incorporating alien discourses, and in fact there is little difference between dialogue and quotations from other sources. The narrator is a ventriloquist who varies between a self-aware man of letters and a sailor telling a yarn, and quotes direct speech, proverbs, and technical terms. He allows extraneous voices to articulate sections of his account, either to give an effect of immediacy or to contribute an evaluative perspective. For instance, superstitious interjections are cited ironically as embodying a limited perspective, but these are part of the world he is representing.

The dialogue is fragmented, so it is no longer a communicative speech act but part of a more anonymous piece of writing, and the alternation of voices is subsumed into an interweaving of discourses, ranging from slang and the technical terminology of sailors to literary allusions and passages in the past historic. The cacophony of different languages is even figured concretely in the enumeration of nationalities patronizing the bar (125–48) which represents a background babble of foreign tongues. Corbière exaggerates the discontinuity between discourses by suppressing the customary metonymic connections such as 'he said'. However, the interwoven discourses do not just clash, but actually blend with each other; the nautical imagery describing Bitor's amorous encounters evokes his outlook in a way which could not be paraphrased, his sailor's life impinging on all experience. The poem may not say one thing and mean another in a straight ironic fashion, but it constantly uses the language of others with a certain distance.

If words are cut off from an identifiable origin, they are also cut off from their destination within the represented world; the dialogue of the characters in the story is no longer discourse directed at other characters. Bitor's talking to himself prior to his escapade (76–85) could be seen as a sort of broken monologue, but elsewhere the utterances are more of a chorus, telling the reader something rather than being part of the action. The narrative is aimed at the reader, but as it is largely constructed out of discontinuous elements it is no single

linear communicative act. Narrative is a means of introducing a variety of characters, languages, and voices, and Corbière exaggerates this heterogeneity by suppressing natural metonymic connections. Laforgue described this poem as 'impossible à chanter' because it stretches prosodic limits, but it also resists monologic performance because its multiple voices break up the lyric line, a technique which is novelistic. The uncertain irony means that events are presented without any conclusion being drawn or moral being spelled out by a narratorial authority. Bitor remains an ambivalent figure. Passages such as the description of his trousers make him a figure of fun, but this irony is not Corbière's most lacerating. Bitor also has romantic aspirations, and could be seen as seeking redemption although he is not aware of it. The last line, '— Le pauvre corps avait connu l'amour!', expresses his satisfaction at the experience, and yet also carries the narrator's ironic awareness of its inadequacy. Bitor's cruel fate in itself gives him pathos, and compassion underlies the material reality. Realism and irony do not negate the epic but give it a new twist, bearing out Flaubert's assertion that 'l'ironie n'enlève rien au pathéthique'.[55]

RELATIVIZING BELIEFS

Although fragmentation and double-voicing have so far been presented in formal terms, beliefs are nonetheless at stake, as is particularly clear in 'La Rapsode foraine et le Pardon de Sainte-Anne'. This long poem uses pictorial techniques to describe the physical afflictions of participants gathering for a religious festival, and also combines an ethnographic approach to the superstition of the Breton people with a metaphysical approach to the question of suffering. It is divided into four sections which each have quite distinct voices. The first sets the scene with a description reminiscent of 'Nature morte', and identifies the setting as a liminal site between the 'sainte' and the 'sauvage', an opposition which the poem systematically undercuts.

The second section takes up the 'sainte'/'sauvage' opposition in a 'cantique spirituel' addressed to *sainte Anne* which is introduced as a 'Chœur séraphique et chant d'ivrogne'. It fuses the sacred and the human, and gives the faithful a voice in a lengthy chorus of praise,

[55] *Correspondance*, ii. 172.

requests, and promises addressed to *sainte Anne*, who is represented in the image of the Breton people:

> *Bâton des aveugles! Béquille*
> *Des vieilles! Bras des nouveau-nés!*
> *Mère de madame ta fille!*
> *Parente des abandonnés!* (41–4)

Corbière refuses to apply single coercive labels to individuals, but instead offers a litany of nominal images, showing how the saint appears differently in the eyes of different people. The scene is presented from two perspectives. There is sympathy to Breton superstition, and concern with elemental fears of sickness, infertility, and death (in both agricultural and domestic contexts). The annual event of the *pardon* is a natural cycle, and the constant alternation between life and death reflects an acceptance of the cyclical nature of life.[56] At the same time, the multiple voices of the participants in the *pardon* are orchestrated by an external consciousness which both mocks them and conveys their preoccupations.

The poem evokes belief indirectly; the cynical speaker could not voice faith directly himself, but conveys the beliefs of the Breton people with sympathy. He compresses much information about their lives into dense language. He makes light of their mercenary quirks, yet this only underlines the harsh reality of their life. Faith is brought down to the human scale in a way which is true to the Christian spirit. Connections are constantly made between the activities of holy figures and those of ordinary people, whether everyday tasks, such as spinning, or the rituals surrounding birth and death. Internal echoes give an incantatory quality and allude to implicit correspondences, underlining the way beliefs are rooted in the everyday lives of these people. Repetitions are not refrain-like or ritualistic formulae, but half-echoes lightly touched in, for instance children's cradles are likened to Christ's crib (61–4 and 73–6). Biblical imagery is fused with the everyday language of social interaction.

The third section is uttered by an onlooker who is spatially close to the scene (he gestures towards it with deictics like 'ici' and 'là') but sceptical about the religion which underpins it. He experiences an emotional response to what he sees, and his mounting anger at the fate of the unfortunate makes his tone increasingly caustic. This depiction

[56] See also 'Saint Tupetu de tu-pe-tu'.

of an unfolding thought process shows a particularized consciousness in action. The speaker begins by quoting declarations of faith made by characters within the scene, such as '*Sainte Anne, ayez pitié de nous!* —' (118) and '— *Allez : la Foi vous a sauvé!* —' (124), which are vestiges of the preceding 'cantique spirituel'. These epitomize the faith of the people he is describing, and he initially interprets the spectacle in the light of their faith, by using terms they might use themselves. He then ceases merely to quote theological formulae of the 'blessed are the poor' variety, and begins to ironize this logic by taking it literally, for instance by sanctifying the invalids into a religious painting, whilst emphasizing the gory reality of their plight:

> Sont-ils pas divins sur leurs claies,
> Qu'auréole un nimbe vermeil
> Ces propriétaires de plaies,
> Rubis vivants sous le soleil!… (129–32)

He then compares the ravages of disease to an organic symbiosis, which ostensibly accepts that suffering is part of the natural order:

> Là, ce tronc d'homme où croît l'ulcère,
> Contre un tronc d'arbre où croît le gui. (137–8)

However, there is a stark contrast between the man afflicted with an ulcer and the tree on which mistletoe benignly grows. Eliot, who describes 'La Rapsode foraine' as Corbière's greatest poem, argues that this 'sudden and surprising collocation of the animal and vegetable' resembles the conceit as used by the metaphysical poets of the seventeenth century in that it establishes a disparity between the idea and the image.[57] The image naively equates disease with natural harmony, but the very disparity between the disease and the natural order only underlines the stark horror of physical malfunction. The faithful would accept disease as part of the divine order, but the speaker's language is straining to come to terms with the all too real affront of suffering. As Eliot acknowledges, where the metaphysical poets of the seventeenth century were merely witty, Corbière's conceits give rise to a more serious irony.[58]

The irony gradually escalates, as the speaker rejects the religious explanations of suffering more vehemently. One indication of the

[57] T. S. Eliot, *The Varieties of Metaphysical Poetry*, ed. Ronald Schuchard (London: Faber, 1993), 218–19.

[58] Ibid. 219.

progression is that at first he insists that the wounds on display are authentic:

> — Ce n'est pas la cour des miracles,
> Les trous sont vrais : *Vide latus*![59] (127–8)

By line 141 he contradicts this with the observation that a father is cultivating his child's abscess in order to beg more money. Rather than directly condemning this practice, he dispassionately describes the cruelty in order to underline the desperate lengths to which the victims have been driven by their plight. He continues to ironize religious formulae by taking them literally:

> — Tiens, passant, regarde: tout passe…
> L'œil de l'idiot est resté.
> Car il est en état-de-grâce…
> — Et la Grâce est l'éternité! — (149–52)

This is a parodic expression of the cliché that the village idiot is pure, in contrast to the knowing sceptic whose nerves are jangling from the effects of civilization. The visual wit of the suspended eye is as surreal as a Cheshire cat's grin, and this initiates a series of increasingly absurd images, which reverse the Christian logic that the first shall be last and the last first. Dysphoric realities are portrayed in euphoric terms—leprosy is likened to blooming flowers:

> Un cadavre, vivant de lèpre,
> Fleurit — souvenir des croisés… (155–6)

There is a gradual progression from describing disease as an organic phenomenon, to embroidering the visual details into witty conceits to express a satirical point of view. An explanation that kings in bygone ages were able to cure the sick by touching them (157–64) culminates in an ironically literal description of pustules as emblems of royalty: 'Ces fleurs de lis en écrouelles' (163). This alludes to the fact that convicts were branded with the fleur-de-lis under the penal code, and also to the superstition that the abscesses caused by scrofula could be cured by kings. Since the belief no longer applies—the speaker underlines that 'La France n'a plus de rois' (159) and suggests that God too has ceased

[59] 'Vide latus', meaning 'see my side', is what Christ says when pointing to his wounds after his resurrection, to convince his doubting disciple Thomas that they are real. The 'cour des miracles' alludes to a scene in Hugo's *Notre-Dame de Paris*, in which beggars fake infirmity, *Romans*, i. 268–9.

to manifest any mercy (160)—it is absurd that these swellings should take the shape of fleur-de-lis. The wit here is partly visual, and by presenting the emblem as swollen flesh, Corbière brings out the erotic associations of the tripartite lily, which resembles the male genitals. Physical realities of illness and sexuality are confronted with ideas of nobility.

This is another example of what Eliot describes as a conceit; the disparity between concrete abscesses and abstract divinity suggests that Christianity is unable to deal with the reality of suffering. Eliot's brief comments on Corbière generally occur in the context of his theory of metaphysical poetry, and thus the question of belief is pivotal in his reading. He takes Corbière out of his historical context, by identifying parallels between his irony (coupled with that of Laforgue) and the wit of the English metaphysical poets of the seventeenth century.[60] Eliot identifies as metaphysical poetry that which deals with the relationship between thought and feeling in a particularly intense way; it translates ideas into sensible form instead of inserting them using commonplaces or discursive exposition.[61] Corbière's heraldic pustules are certainly a vivid way of investing a thought in poetry. In Eliot's view, metaphysical poetry makes manifest the intimate relation between our philosophical beliefs and our private feelings and behaviour, and this can occur in full possession of belief, in the disintegration of belief, or in the conscious loss of belief and the search for it (in contrast to philosophical poetry in which a system is felt as a whole by a poet).[62] This notion of metaphysical poetry thus depends on Eliot's theory of the history of belief, 'in which the thirteenth century, the seventeenth, and the nineteenth century, all occupy their places in [. . .] a process of disintegration'.[63] Debatable though Eliot's grand narrative and the 'disssociation of sensibility' theory may be, the perspective in which he places Corbière nonetheless brings out the particularity of the latter's irony both as a rhetorical device, and as a world-view, for Corbière represents the disintegration of belief through the concrete representation of experience. In the 'cantique spirituel' section there was a real relation between beliefs

[60] There is no direct literary historical link between Corbière and the English poets to whom Eliot compares him, notably Crashaw. However, Odette de Mourgues argues that there are French equivalents to the English metaphysicals, and examines their use of the conceit, in *Metaphysical, Baroque and Précieux Poetry* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1953). Corbière does echo seventeenth-century French poets such as Saint-Amant, as well as the earlier *grand rhétoriqueurs*.

[61] *Varieties of Metaphysical Poetry*, 53–4. [62] Ibid. 293. [63] Ibid. 220.

and behaviour, but here the ingenious wit reflects the divergence of belief and experience. The poem as a whole thus traces a sequence of disintegration, and moves from the faith of the 'cantique' towards a more sceptical viewpoint.

The variations on the 'blessed are the poor' theme stage a conflict between faith and doubt, which Verlaine identified when he called Corbière a 'faux sceptique effrayant'.[64] Corbière repeats the letter of Christian teaching and shows it to be wanting when faced with the harshness of reality. He ironically refers to suffering people as the 'choisis', the 'élus', and shows that the promise of salvation is a mockery in the face of their earthly suffering. Irony often debases the noble by describing it in trivial terms, but Corbière describes sordid reality in noble terms. References to existing representations and man-made institutions contrast with the earlier organic descriptions, and expose the absurdity of value systems. He juxtaposes criticism of religious doctrine with compassion for human suffering. Corbière does not just express sympathy, but elevates the abrasive wear and tear of life to a visionary level to criticize man-made systems. He attacks rational explanations for things that defy reason. Houston emphasizes that Corbière replaces abstractions with sensations, which are often described in highly physical terms: 'the rubbing and erosion the individual perceives as the condition of living'.[65] The visual impact of the language underlines the visceral nature of sickness. Emphasizing the fragility of the human frame is a Christian practice, and the depiction of flayed bodies in the iconography of the Crucifixion is central to the Christian tradition. The literal representations of the body disintegrate into visionary wit in order to carry the abstractions.

The cynical speaker is foregrounded as a persona, and the external scene sparks strong reactions in his mind. The nightmarish vision of lines 185–8 suggests he is deranged by the spectacle. Having first described the plight of the infirm with compassion, and then struggled to contain his anger with wit, the witness seems to succumb to panic and the scene takes on a correspondingly hellish aspect. The mounting existential indignation is not conveyed by a logical exposition but by a realistic representation of an individual's stream-of-consciousness. His outrage culminates in a quatrain of outright satire in the manner of 'La Pastorale de Conlie':

[64] *Les Poètes maudits*, 641.
[65] *French Symbolism and the Modernist Movement*, 61.

Du grand troupeau, boucs émissaires
Chargés des forfaits d'ici-bas,
Sur eux Dieu purge ses colères!
— Le pasteur de Sainte-Anne est gras. — (193–6)

Salvation and doubt seem more urgent concerns than if they were evoked as abstractions. An individual riveted by gory details which provoke ugly reactions is more realistic than an orator sentimentalizing compassion for the poor, and more likely to engage the reader. The speaker is perhaps not so much expressing his own fear, as he is using horrific imagery calculated to *épater les bourgeois*. Unusually, the reader is buttonholed directly, first cast as a fellow passerby ('— Tiens, passant, regarde: tout passe', 149) and then as an impressionable young girl:

… Et détourne-toi, jeune fille
Qui viens là voir, et prendre l'air…
Peut-être, sous l'autre guenille,
Percerait la guenille en chair… (173–6)

This is attacking the false modesty of bourgois averting their gaze from flesh, and, by implication, from the reality of death. The speaker feels solidarity with the outcasts, and expresses fear indirectly through his irony.

The fourth and last section finally introduces the eponymous 'rapsode foraine', described in the third person by a more detached and moderate voice who sketches a portrait of this travelling singer using the uncomplicated vocabulary and popular turns of phrase she might use herself. The speaker emphasizes her own concerns such as hunger, but remains firmly outside (prefacing one remark with 'sans doute', referring to her as 'ça') and does not attempt to access her consciousness. As in 'Le Mousse', the poet's voice is unobtrusive, and there is no Parisian analysis or flamboyant poeticizing. However, the speaker acts as a guide, glossing the local colour for the general reader by explaining the *rapsode*'s role. Although he observes her from outside, the way he adopts her language suggests identification. This is made explicit when he states that she is a *Doppelgänger* for the poet:

— Si tu la rencontres, Poète,
Avec son vieux sac de soldat:
C'est notre sœur… donne — c'est fête —
Pour sa pipe, un peu de tabac!… (229–32)

Although they belong in different worlds, both the poet and the *rapsode* have an understanding of human suffering, so there is an underlying

sense of the unity of the human condition. Interestingly, the poet's counterpart, the 'rapsode', does not perform in the first person, but we are told that she sings a traditional 'complainte' and the quality of her voice is described from outside. Its timbre is determined by the instrument of a living breathing body: 'Elle hâle comme une plainte', and 'Ça chante comme ça respire'. This sense of a direct physical process contrasts with the complex double-voicing of the poem as a whole. The poem concludes by focusing on a performer's human 'face creuse' (233); this figure contrasts with the disembodied ventriloquist who has orchestrated the poem as a whole, but both are poets concerned for humanity.

Each of the four sections has a particular vocal arrangement which plays on a tension between disparate voices. The voice of the 'cantique spirituel' (section two) fuses with that of the Breton people, the voice of the cynical speaker (section three) articulates the injustice of their lot in terms alien to their own sphere of reference. The 'cantique spirituel' implies an acceptance of faith, as it shows religion to be in harmony with humanity (both are flawed) but in section three religion is found more drastically wanting as it is an inadequate explanation for the human suffering that is witnessed. The people's invocation of *sainte Anne* in the 'cantique spirituel' is full of modest requests, as though people are resigned to the difficulty of life and not asking much of religion. When this is followed by the spectacle of acute human suffering (reminiscent of Dante's *Inferno*) in section three, the implication is that divine punishment is out of proportion to what is deserved, underlining the wretchedness of the human condition. Corbière observes the Breton people through a different optic in each section, and the different sections represent the same problems from different angles, without ultimately offering any answer.

Ironic double-voicing is used to refract experience in order to tackle serious subjects rather than merely to convey a comic distance between author and characters. There is an underlying unity to the vision which conveys as much about the human condition as it does about the particular locality. The particular and physical are used to pose big spiritual questions. Corbière communicates sympathy for outcasts but does not subscribe to any established theological system. Unlike Baudelaire or Hugo, he does not construct a global scheme in which suffering is assigned a place. His is a poetry of sensations rather than of ideas, and its fragmented style underlines the impression of a world of chaotic matter not underpinned by any higher order.

The use of the particular to carry general thoughts is illustrated in 'La Fin', a parody of Hugo's 'Oceano Nox', in which Corbière rewrites Romantic discourse about the sea in a realist mode, only to have this realism shade rapidly into a visionary style closer to Rimbaud's 'Le Bateau ivre'. 'La Fin' dissects vocabulary rather than merely using it:

> Un grain… est-ce la mort ça? La basse voilure
> Battant à travers l'eau! — Ça se dit *encombrer*…
> Un coup de mer plombé, puis la haute mâture
> Fouettant les flots ras — et ça se dit *sombrer*. (11–14)

Corbière is not content with vague abstractions, and explains what the poetic euphemisms conceal. This is the nearest he comes to outlining his own aesthetic, and it is slipped in at the end of the book which has already put it into practice. He still romanticizes the sailors, but this is expressed through a compressed language which suggests the brutal reality of death. It evokes the great unknown by combining elements of the known:

> … Qu'ils roulent infinis dans les espaces vierges!
> Qu'ils roulent verts et nus,
> Sans clous et sans sapin, sans couvercle, sans cierges…
> — Laissez-les donc rouler, *terriens* parvenus! (39–42)

'La Fin' starts by telling us something about a particular world but ends up applying its precise descriptive style to the universal reality of death. Corbière's language does not aspire to a direct correspondence between words and things, and anticipates Symbolism in its use of a set of concrete details to refer to an elusive abstraction.

The poet's siding with the sailors against the 'terriens' in this instance is a rhetorical means of addressing the reader and justifying his capacity to offer insights into death. Poets conventionally have privileged acquaintance with this realm, but, rather than assuming that the verse medium gives him the authority to tackle the theme, Corbière prefers to explore death by speaking through the sailors who undeniably face it on a daily basis. It is not so much that he is telling us that sailors live dangerous lives, as that he is using their lives as a way of describing something beyond the everyday life of his reader. Corbière may not share the world-view of the sailors and Breton people, but he shares their preoccupation with mortality. He rejects poetry which has lost contact with concrete realities, and his own work combines a strong sense of elemental forces with a more sophisticated urban self-consciousness.

Irony is not directed against Brittany but is used as a way of tackling larger themes. The Brittany poems use precision and particularity to address universal questions. Corbière's poetry is not impersonal in the Parnassian sense of the poem as a beautifully crafted artefact, but he achieves impersonality by mixing a plurality of modes of presentation which prevent the reader from identifying a consistent pattern. His style, like Flaubert's, is a way of seeing, and the external world is filtered through an ironizing consciousness. Corbière's incorporation of oral fragments is the origin of his double-voicing technique, whereby it is made difficult to pin down the position of the speaker. It also enables him to refract the outside world through different points of view and to build up a complex picture. The Brittany poems use dialogue not only to achieve an effect of realism, but also as a means of juxtaposing conflicting points of view. He compacts a range of material and sense experience into writing, creating a heteroclite texture. Both the microscopic precision of the language and the difficulty of identifying a total point of view suggest a fractured vision of the world. The Brittany poems build up an ironic world-view, by fusing a cynical Parisian voice with a naive Breton voice. Corbière's early poems thus experiment with the techniques of fragmentation and polyphony which become central to his ironic aesthetic and are pushed to the limit in his later Paris poems.

3

Portraits of the Artist: Ironizing Irony

Some of Corbière's most self-conscious texts are those which represent artist figures, and these are inextricably linked with the Paris setting. Whereas his Brittany poems present the poet as a generalized figure of exile, his Parisian poems define the artist's exclusion more specifically as an effect of the destabilizing quality of urban life and the flux of values in an industrial age. Some commentators judge the urban poems inferior to those set in Brittany, and Gustave Kahn even suggests that Corbière, despite his efforts, did not really capture the spirit of 'parisianisme'.[1] However, the interest of the poems lies in the way Paris is filtered through the optic of an outsider, and descriptions of the urban life are internalized. In the city, appearances are deceptive, and being a poet involves awareness of the artifice of fiction and adopting a mask or pose. The urban environment presents a challenge to the artist struggling to represent the sensations of speed and noise. Furthermore, artists are not only struggling to record the city but aware of the difficulty of finding their audience in it, and Corbière's poetry explores the changing relationship between art, money, and power in this period. Much of his irony articulates the contradictions which arose in the course of what Bourdieu describes as the autonomization of the cultural field, the process by which cultural production gradually established itself as a domain independent of state institutions, subject to market forces yet with its own system of symbolic capital.[2] *Les Amours jaunes* conveys the reality of poets struggling to establish themselves in the literary field, hesitating over whether to adopt an existing profitable literary pose or whether to risk originality which might bring the advantage of symbolic value. These poems about art thus need to be located in their cultural and socio-historical context: a world in which disparate languages and

[1] 'Il a apporté de Bretagne l'essentiel de son livre [. . .], il n'en a pas apporté le *parisianisme* qu'il a tenté de toutes ses forces de réaliser', 'Tristan Corbière', 274.

[2] See Pierre Bourdieu, *Les Règles de l'art*, Points (Paris: Seuil, 1998).

values collide, in which the artist is disoriented by the changing power structures that are reshaping his profession.

It is necessary to tackle the theme of art by examining the construction of artist personae, because the unstable irony makes it difficult to extrapolate a coherent view of art or the artist by singling out individual aesthetic statements. *Les Amours jaunes* is peppered with metapoetic slogans of a polemic kind, but these are either humorously baffling or undercut the very notion of art. The introductory poem 'Ça?' concludes a litany of contradictory definitions of the book with a typical pronouncement:

> C'est un coup de raccroc, juste ou faux, par hasard…
> L'Art ne me connaît pas. Je ne connais pas l'Art. (31–2)

The tone of revolt is clear enough, but it is difficult to pin down the artist's exact aesthetic stance. The multiplication of contradictory terms like 'juste' and 'faux' suggests that the terminology of evaluation is meaningless. 'L'Art' is capitalized, but the implied respect is ironic, and the speaker challenges the concept in its institutional sense rather than expounding an alternative. Given that Corbière left no material elucidating an aesthetic theory, the reader is tempted to seize on such self-reflexive formulae and read them as fragments of a manifesto. However, when they are not blatantly self-contradictory, they are undercut by their context or uttered by unreliable personae. They cannot be taken at face value, but must be read in relation to the polyphonic texture of which they are a part. Corbière thus makes it impossible for us to read any given statement as directly voicing his *art poétique*. He seems to be making a joke of Art, but his particular art is that of the joke, and this wilfully anti-intellectual style needs to be approached on its own terms. His self-reflexivity is not to be found in isolated nuggets, but is articulated through the constant linguistic play, and by the way in which the poems construct personae.

Particularly in the urban poems, these personae are often identified as poets, and occasionally as painters. As a result, a better understanding of Corbière's art can be gained from analysing his representation of the artist than from any survey of the metapoetic formulae. A variety of different communicative strategies are used to present diverse artistic figures: sometimes an artist is described by a third party, sometimes the speaker is an artist who addresses the reader directly, sometimes two artists dialogue with each other, and frequently the discourse of the artist is inhabited by two voices, which blurs the direct line of communication. Corbière's

poems do not present a vague lyric 'I', allowing the reader to identify with the speaker, but constantly reveal their subject to be a fictional construct, by shifting voices between poems, and having speakers allude to their own artifice. As Laforgue indicates when he says of Corbière 'tout ça c'est fait de chic, je pose',[3] the pose lays bare the workings of the lyric 'I', and thus functions as a commentary on poetry itself.

'Pose' is a word which repeatedly crops up in Corbière's poems about art, and is worth unpacking, as it points to many of the key themes of this chapter. The word is a product of the Parisian milieu, and one of the terms associated with the language used by its bohemians, as popularized by Murger.[4] Corbière describes Paris using specifically Parisian discourses, just as he describes Brittany using language derived from his father's novels and La Landelle's poetry. Critical studies of Corbière's style have tended to view this bohemian jargon as part of his lexical extravagance, but his play on terms such as 'pose', 'chic', 'blague', and 'ficelles' (his favourites are all variations on the theme of artifice) is a way of addressing aesthetic issues through concrete particulars. The pose has negative connotations of affectation and artifice, particularly in the social context where it is often synonymous with hypocrisy.[5] However, Corbière appropriates the term for himself, both to define his own poetry, as in '…*ÇA* c'est naïvement une impudente *pose*',[6] and to attack conventional postures, as in 'L'Incompris couche avec sa pose'.[7] In 'Épitaphe' he explicitly plays on its ambivalence:

> Ne fut *quelqu'un*, ni quelque chose
> Son naturel était la *pose*.
> Pas poseur, — posant pour *l'unique*;
> Trop naïf, étant trop cynique. (42–5)

Its evaluating force depends on who is using it, but that is never certain in a dialogic Corbière poem. Like 'Art' in the contradictory metapoetic

[3] 'Une étude sur Corbière', 2.

[4] He describes the particularities of this eclectic idiom 'où les tournures apocalyptiques coudoient le coq-à l'âne, où la rusticité du dicton populaire s'allie à des périodes extravagantes sorties du même moule où Cyrano coulait ses tirades matamores; où le paradoxe, cet enfant gâté de la littérature moderne, traite la raison comme on traite Cassandre dans les pantomines; où l'ironie a la violence des acides les plus prompts, et l'adresse de ces tireurs qui font mouche les yeux bandés; argot intelligent quoique inintelligible pour tous ceux qui n'en ont pas la clef' in *Scènes de la vie de bohème*, Folio (Paris: Gallimard, 1988), 42.

[5] Flaubert and the Goncourts often use *poseur* as a pejorative term.

[6] 'Ça', 25. [7] 'Paris' III, 5.

slogans, it is hard to tell whether he revels in the pose or despises it. Corbière destabilizes the word 'pose' by playing on its evaluating edge.

More importantly, the notion of the pose refers to the generalized textual strategy of revealing speaking personae to be artificial constructs. The label 'pose' is a cliché which resumes a whole persona, and many of Corbière's poems express the poet's fear of being defined by such a superficial tag. He resists fixity by presenting a succession of masks and exposing speakers as impostors. The pose encompasses both sociological and aesthetic concerns, suggesting simultaneously a social pretence and an artistic arrangement. Poses of a more social kind, notably the bohemian dramatization of life, contribute to the realism of his representation of Paris. Literary poses are used ironically as a way of exploring the difficulty of being original; Corbière vacillates between fear of repeating the commonplace and delight at inventively renewing well-worn themes. Although his poetic subjects frequently define themselves as poets, as underlined by the witticism 'Je rime, donc je vis',[8] the pose is also a device in which problems peculiar to the poet overlap with more universal existential concerns. The difficulty of locating any essential self beyond the proliferation of masks conveys a generalized crisis of identity. In an illuminating discussion of Corbière's pose in this broader sense, Marshall Lindsay refuses the conventional reading of the pose as an ironic laughing mask which hides a tearful face. He argues that although '*Les Amours jaunes* ont l'air tout d'abord d'une grande parade où rien n'est vrai que le contraire de ce qui est dit', in reality the pose is a serious quest to affirm the self.[9] It is certainly not possible to recuperate a real personality from behind the façade—the posing is intrinsic to the poetic subject, and serves to enact the inner conflicts of a troubled self. Marshall Lindsay rightly points out the performative force of the pose and links its theatricality to the rhetoric of irony. The poses need to be considered more specifically in terms of the speaking voice, to see how Corbière's dialogic techniques express at once the poet's problematic relationship with the artistic milieu and his inner conflicts.

THE ARTIST IN THE CITY

Corbière represents Paris very much from the point of view of the poet. His urban scenes are generally presented either as material to be

[8] 'Le Poète contumace', 69. [9] *Le Temps jaune*, 1.

consumed by the artist, or as analogies for the artist's situation. 'Idylle coupée' sketches a panorama of early morning street life, noting the emergence of a pageant of prostitutes, followed by a pair of artists rummaging around in search of material for their art. This juxtaposition suggests a parallel between prostitute and artist, a commonplace analogy for artists who felt they were compromising their work in order to cater for the emerging mass public. The commercialization of art is playfully derided in an attack on the realists:

> … Ils donnent des noms de fabrique
> A la pochade du bon Dieu! (59–60)

Indeed, much of the poem is a reworking of commonplaces. Corbière builds up his picture by recombining key features of the urban poet topos, which are familiar from Baudelaire. The speaker mocks the various strategies deployed to make art out of dissonant urban material. The two artists, 'le poète du charnier' and 'le peintre chiffonnier', hope to find a pearl amongst the manure. If the parallel with Baudelaire's ambition to extract gold from the mud of Paris suggests this is a heroic endeavour undertaken in testing conditions,[10] the biblical allusion to 'pearls before swine' (Matthew 7: 6) suggests these artists are unable to recognize what is of true value. The parodic view of the artists as pigs is reinforced by the subsequent reference to their snouts. Their hope of transcending this sordid reality with reverie is also mocked:

> — Ajoutez une pipe en terre
> Dont la spirale fait les cieux…
> Allez : je plains votre misère,
> Vous qui trouvez qu'on trouve mieux! (45–8)

The speaker's refusal of all these recognizable aesthetic responses eventually leads him to question his own stance. He had been endeavouring to defy definition by challenging the positions occupied by others, but the irony rebounds on him and he reveals that he too is a poet cultivating a pose:

> On veut, aveugle taciturne,
> A soi tout seul être blagueur. (71–2)

The *blagueur* was an established Parisian type, whose subversive mockery had quickly become a routine pose, mocked by the Goncourt

[10] See Ch. 2 n. 47 above.

brothers as 'la révolte parisienne de la désillusion, la formule légère et gamine du blasphème'.[11] The *blague* constituted an artistic pose with its own language. In its very inauthenticity, it was a product of its time, and often rejected as a frustratingly all-pervasive banality, as by Flaubert: 'Nous sommes tous des farceurs et des charlatans. Pose, pose, et blague partout! La crinoline a dévoré les fesses, notre siècle est un siècle de putains, et ce qu'il y a de moins prostitué, jusqu'à présent, ce sont les prostituées.'[12] Corbière does not aristocratically rise above the *blague*—indeed his humour is at times reminiscent of it—but fights it on its own terms by using irony.

Having established a first-person viewpoint, 'Idylle coupée' then derides further stereotypical responses from within. It mocks the sensual Baudelairian experience of the imagination being fired by observation:

> Il coule une divine flamme,
> Sous la peau; l'on se sent avoir
> Je ne sais quoi qui fleure l'âme…
> Je ne sais — mais ne veux savoir. (77–80)

The appearance of a *Doppelgänger* with a 'gueule d'artiste' relativizes the poet's pose by implying that he is no isolated ironic outsider, but one of a multitude of *flâneurs* (92). Inspiration turns out to be no more than an erotic response to a girl in the street. The disparity between mundane cause and exaggerated ecstasy gradually escalates, in a grotesque parody of the chance encounter of Baudelaire's 'À une passante'. The *Doppelgänger* is so transfixed by the vision that he is run over by a bus. As a victim of the hazards of traffic, he is a literary successor to the poet who loses his halo in Baudelaire's prose poem 'Perte d'auréole'. The speaker in 'Idylle coupée' is echoed in the figures he observes, and he ironizes both himself and them. He emerges as a comic figure within the scene, a detached *blagueur* who derides art but is unable to step right outside it. The poem is self-conscious both in its play on existing clichés, and in its description of the urban poet who watches himself watching.

Clichés and realistic details are reformulated to produce a burlesque effect, and this is extended to more detailed descriptions of the bohemian milieu, a world with which Corbière was familiar, since he lived on

[11] Part of the virtuoso ironic description of the *blague* in *Manette Solomon*, Folio (Paris: Gallimard, 1996), 108.

[12] *Correspondance*, ii. 518.

its fringes in Paris. Bohemian life was nonetheless well-established as a stock literary theme, and his representation of it owes much to novels such as Murger's *Scènes de la vie de bohème*. The poem 'Le Convoi du pauvre' addresses the specific circumstances of painters. It is one of a number to address aesthetic and social questions connected with the visual arts, building on the preoccupation with the pictorial identified in the Brittany poems. Specific signs of this interest include quotations of the slang peculiar to the 'clan rapin',[13] as well as technical art terms.[14] 'Le Convoi du pauvre' fuses mundane realistic details with bohemian mythology. It plays on a typical scenario of a failed artist figure hauling a painting rejected from the Salon back up to his Montmartre home. The canvas is likened to a hearse going to its final resting place, and the artist's journey to the *via dolorosa*. This is both a parodic exaggeration of the Romantic myth of the artist as martyr, and a travesty of the ascent associated with inspiration. Named landmarks generate burlesque religious images. For instance, the epigraph locates the poem in the Rue Notre-Dame-de-Lorette, but the poem transforms the church into an onlooking streetwalker laughing at the artist in the lines 'du piteux enterrement | Rit la Lorette notre dame…' (11–12). The *lorettes* were named after this locality, where they operated, but Corbière playfully inverts the etymology to suggest the church was named after them. Similarly, the reference to the 'martyrs' is an implicit reference to the adjacent rue des Martyrs, a notorious bohemian neighbourhood.[15]

The poem is also realistic in its modes of representation, for it uses multiple voices to provide contrasting evaluations of the figure of the failed artist. His exclamations of effort at dragging his painting are juxtaposed with words of encouragement from his fellows. Despite his humiliation, he melodramatically declaims '— Mais mon âme est dans

[13] The ubiquitous 'chic' and 'ficelles', terms like 'plat d'épinard' meaning 'a painting which is too green' ('Bohème de chic') and 'guitare' meaning 'banal' ('Rapsodie du sourd').

[14] Such as 'ombre portée' and 'd'après nature' in 'Le Poète contumace'. He often uses these as puns, using their literal as well as figurative meanings, for instance 'gâchant' ('Épitaphe'), 'manière noire' ('Fleur d'art'). Aragon and Bonnin point out that the much-discussed 'bête' in 'Découragеux' is a word which has a particular meaning when used with reference to art ('unoriginal'), *Les Amours jaunes*, 233.

[15] The area around the rue des Martyrs was a centre of bohemian activity, and Corbière was not the first to joke about the street name; the Goncourts refer to the rue des Martyrs as 'ainsi nommée parce qu'elle est remplie de peintres qui s'exposent volontairement aux bêtes chaque année, à l'époque de l'Exposition', *Manette Salomon*, 84.

la charrette', suggesting he sees himself as a wronged hero. The origin of the more impersonal voice in stanzas 3–5 is less certain. For instance, the third stanza slides from compassion to derision:

> Corbillard dur à fendre l'âme.
> Vers en bas l'attire un aimant;
> Et du piteux enterrement
> Rit la Lorette notre dame… (9–12)

It is not clear whether the speaker feels either the compassion or the derision, or is merely reporting both attitudes without subscribing to either. 'C'est bien ça — Splendeur et misère!' (13) represents yet another angle. This glib interjection sounds like a Balzacian opposition being quoted by an onlooker to explain the spectacle. Praise of the grandeur then quickly tips into an attack on bohemian profligacy, with a barbed observation that the elaborate picture frame has not been paid for. The glimpse of the frame eclipses the painting itself, implying the artist privileges superficial show. This is reinforced by the theatrical connotations of 'tréteau', and of '*fours*' (slang for a flop). The spectacle in this instance is failure—art which might have hoped to immortalize the transient is on public display as a superfluous encumbrance.

The rhetoric of artistic idealism is constantly countered by grim reality. The dramatic irony is amplified by oxymoron at every twist and turn, particularly in the statements about art in which the artist's voice fuses with that of his friends:

> — Oui, camarade, il faut qu'on sue
> Après son harnais et son art
> Après les ailes : le brancard!
> Vivre notre métier — ça tue… (21–4)

Are they boldly stating their idealism in the face of adversity, or is the poem mocking them for perversely clinging to deluded ideals? The artist's perspiration may be caused by the weight of the 'harnais' but also by the past effort of creating 'son art'. 'Après les ailes: le brancard!' again ironically juxtaposes the physical effort of hauling home the rejected canvas with the inspirational flight which had originally created it. These parallel lines, linked by the anaphoric 'Après', form a chiastic structure in which the artwork is framed by the deadly load of the hearse. The irony is intensified by the phonetic presence of the word 'art' in both 'harnais' and 'brancard'. The zeugma of 'Tués l'idéal et le râble!', an utterance that seems to originate from the artist himself, suggests that the artist is ironizing his own ideals, but elsewhere he

seems to cling to delusions of nobility, for which the poem mocks him. The poem takes up the religious imagery enlisted by artists to proclaim their consecrated status and uses it against them to mock their presumption, so the irony cuts both ways. The artist is derided for using religious imagery to transform his failure into a noble event, and the poem is simultaneously using religion ironically to demonstrate the triviality of this episode in relation to the real *via dolorosa*. The parodic religious touches may also allude to the fact that impoverished artists were reduced to turning out paintings of religious subjects to make money.[16] It uses the particular instance of the Salon system as an illustration of the problematic relationship between the artist and his audience. The painter's faith in his artistic ideals is threatened, but in a poem which itself devalues the ideal. The shifts in perspective do not establish whether the artist is playing the buffoon to laugh off his failure, or whether the irony is directed at him from an external standpoint. Polyphony creates a montage of different views of the artist, and builds uncertainty about his value into the language. The play on multiple perspectives is part of Corbière's realism of representation, and his indirect rhetorical techniques are used to comment on the artist's environment. In 'Idylle coupée' he reworks the literary clichés of the modern poet and in 'Le Convoi du pauvre' he sets out the institutional and economic problems faced by the artist.

BOHEMIAN FIGURES OF FUN

'Le Convoi du pauvre' builds a whole network of ironic uncertainty around the problematic term 'art'. Similarly, the word 'pose', whose ambivalence was discussed earlier, is not merely a loaded term which crops up from time to time, but sums up the structuring principle which characterizes so many of the poems. Corbière constantly plays on the ambiguity of the monologue form to reveal the artifice of poetic postures. For instance, 'Bohème de chic' stages a lifestyle pose. The ironist inhabits the bohemian discourse of anti-bourgeois rhetoric and undercuts it from within. The title is oxymoronic, as 'bohème' is a byword for spontaneity and freedom, whereas 'de chic' indicates an automated procedure. Baudelaire denounces it as meaning 'absence

[16] The painter Anatole in *Manette Salomon* produces gaudy 'Chemins-de-croix' to make money, 191.

de modèle et de nature',[17] and it is often used pejoratively to mean representation from memory using existing devices, with the implication that it can be produced quickly and requires little skill. The speaker's tone is of spontaneous rebellion, yet the poem reveals this to be an artifice. The recipe-like formula of the title is literalized in the cooking imagery of the opening quatrain:

> Ne m'offrez pas un trône!
> A moi tout seul je fris,
> Drôle, en ma sauce jaune
> De chic et de mépris. (1–4)

The yellow sauce is merely dressing for a rather half-baked bohemian. 'Fris' and 'mépris' are indissolubly linked by the rhyme, confirming the suspicion that the disenchanted world-view is merely cooked up for effect. The speaker is a less self-aware version of the *blagueur* in 'Idylle coupée', unaware that his exaggerated revolt verges on the ridiculous. He rejects the 'Plate époque râpée' (9) and sums it up with the standard bourgeois accessories, recombined in a surreal image:

> Que les bottes vernies
> Pleuvent du paradis,
> Avec des parapluies…
> Moi, va-nu-pieds, j'en ris! (5–8)

The superfluity belies the value invested in these objects by their bourgeois owners. The playful use of the cliché emphasizes that this is a comment on anti-bourgeois discourse as much as a direct attack on this enemy. It recalls Murger's lament about bohemians who risk failure because they refuse to lower themselves to practical matters: 'si vous leur faites observer tranquillement que nous sommes au XIXe siècle, que la pièce de cent sous est Impératrice de l'humanité, et que les bottes ne tombent pas toutes vernies du ciel, ils vous tournent le dos et vous appellent bourgeois.'[18] Corbière's naive bohemian inverts this sort of bourgeois common sense to turn it against the bourgeoisie. The burlesque exaggeration, intensified by the transformation of 'ciel' into 'paradis' and by the humorous rhymes, is directed against the

[17] *Œuvres complètes*, ii. 468.

[18] Preface to *Scènes de la vie de bohème*, 36. This novel was written once Murger had made his name and achieved bourgeois respectability. Fear of such a fate is another bohemian cliché, which Corbière uses in 'Déclin', which describes the poet as 'fini, banal, célèbre'.

bourgeois. However, it rebounds on the bohemian himself, who cannot escape from these clichés. Corbière plays on the stock opposition of bourgeois stupidity and bohemian fervour, but does not come down on either side. Indeed, the two sides can only be defined in terms of each other, since the bohemian is the bourgeois view of the artist. Laforgue rightly points out Corbière's detachment from the bohemians, saying 'Il a pris la fleur de la Bohême — par escapades — rentrant ensuite dans la discipline lointaine — ne conservant de la bohême qu'une fleur nostalgique.'[19] In 'Bohème de chic', the bohemian's poverty is wittily described in bourgeois terms, and his rebellious independence undercut by the information that his 'papa' subsidizes his life of ostentatious poverty. Absurdly, the props of 'poux' and 'haillons' have cost money, and the vagabond defines himself with a coat of arms. Poverty is a contrived effect and permeated by establishment values. The pose itself is weary, with the description of the moon as a coin a rather routine attack on Romantic symbolism. His rebellion is a pose prompted by signs requesting propriety:

> Je pose aux devantures
> Où je lis; — DÉFENDU
> DE POSER DES ORDURES —
> Roide comme un pendu! (33–6)

The bohemian is merely acting a rather wooden part that does not come naturally. He roams around the city professing receptivity, but his vaporization operates humorously at the level of realistic details and, unlike Baudelaire's 'sainte prostitution', is not elevated to a mystical experience. The eroticism verges on the grotesque in lines such as 'Nous bandons à la gueule' (31), which is a play on the heraldic terms 'bander' and 'gueules', and in the following:

> [Je] me plante sans gêne
> Dans le plat du hasard,
> Comme un couteau sans gaine
> Dans un plat d'épinard. (37–40)

The spinach not only continues the culinary paradigm, but is also a pejorative term for a painting with too much green. If life is driven by chance, art is a bad painting, and the speaker enters both enterprises in a similarly clumsy fashion. The bohemian pose of revolt turns back to

[19] 'Une étude sur Corbière', 10.

question the self, and Corbière undermines the pose from within rather than denouncing it openly.

'Un jeune qui s'en va' uses a similar procedure to denounce poetic poses from within poetry. The ironist inhabits—or is inhabited by—the pose of the dying Romantic, which is transparent from the beginning:

> Oh le printemps! — Je voudrais paître!…
> C'est drôle, est-ce pas : Les mourants
> Font toujours ouvrir leur fenêtre,
> Jaloux de leur part de printemps! (1–4)

The poet goes on to reassure his loved one that his death is only a fiction, and envisages the lifestyle that publication would secure. This turns out to be an ironically bourgeois combination of a well appointed bedroom, fishing expeditions, and new dresses, topped by the bourgeois motto 'Pour vivre il faut bien travailler' (48). Also included in the wish-list is the aspiration '*mourir pour la patrie*' (43), the title of a popular song. This ironically elevates his death pose to a patriotic duty, and underlines the double standards of his career strategy: the successful bourgeois poet might invoke the song's sentiment as an ideal but would hardly sacrifice his comfortable existence in practice. The poet analyses his own status as a cliché, saying 'Ce n'est même plus original' (68), and lists authors who have already used the topos, wittily concluding 'j'en ai lus mourir' (89). He fills a poem about dying with mercenary preoccupations, and death is no more than a theme which goes with the job: 'Métier: se rimer finir' (95). The pernicious effect of bourgeois profit-making on poetry is indirectly suggested through the description of a poet who treats it as a 'métier'. The 'Métier de mourir' (93) can also be read as an ironic description of the poetic vocation, which is often equated with a privileged insight into death. By attacking those who exploit death, Corbière indirectly emphasizes its real importance, and indeed its spectre haunts *Les Amours jaunes*.

Corbière is not only a latecomer faced with the weight of tradition, but is also aware that the poetic tradition is being tainted by the era of high capitalism. Hugues Laroche points out that Corbière criticizes Lamartine for parading his sentiment in order to make money, and argues that Corbière uses the words of others in order to avoid prostituting himself by giving away anything too close to his own heart.[20] The pose is another way of avoiding direct self-revelation. The speaker of 'Un jeune

[20] *Tristan Corbière, ou les voix de la corbière*, 33.

qui s'en va' is no vague 'je' with whom the audience identifies, but has the contours of a separate persona. Corbière reacts against Romantic confessional poetry in which the author communicated directly with the audience, and confidently evoked shared experience. The direct lyrical line of the Romantics used to convey personal themes entailed serving oneself up for public consumption, but Corbière problematizes this through his poses.

Death is doubly commodified in 'Un jeune qui s'en va', since the pose is already a manufactured position, and adopted in this instance to make money. Poetry is described as commodifying experience, which is an indirect way of suggesting that self-interest has permeated all areas of life, since poetry typically represents the last repository of other values. The ironic lowering of poetry to this level is part of the realism of the representation of Paris, and the preoccupation with the money theme is a typically nineteenth-century aspect of *Les Amours jaunes*. The pose allows the poet to evoke commercialization whilst using irony to signal distance from it, and also allows him to articulate his internal division of the artist and the difficulty of being authentic.

'PARIS': DIALOGUE AND 'LA CHARGE DE LA CHARGE'

Corbière's ironic pose is a sure way of attacking Romantic predecessors, but is less sure as a means of attacking the ironic *blagueurs* of Paris. As Flaubert points out, 'on ne peut pas faire la charge de la charge elle-même.'[21] However, Corbière's sequence of sonnets 'Paris' succeeds in showing the pose as simultaneously ironic and ironized. We have already seen how irony is used to represent Paris realistically, to examine the poet from multiple perspectives, and to reflect his internal divisions, and 'Paris' combines all these techniques. The sequence has a prominent position in the metapoetic opening section of *Les Amours jaunes*, 'Ça'. By dissolving a series of commonplaces into a riot of staccato images, it reworks the familiar nineteenth-century story of a young poet who comes to Paris in search of success, struggles to make his name, and ends in disillusioned failure. The idea of the charlatan adopting poses in order to conquer Paris

[21] *Œuvres complètes de Gustave Flaubert*, viii. *La Première Èducation sentimentale*, 216.

is familiar, and the opening, 'Il vint aussi là', shows the story is aware of itself as a cliché — both 'aussi' and 'là' presuppose other versions.

The title 'Paris' emphasizes the importance of the urban setting, and the first sonnet presents the artist at odds with the city. Paris is described as a 'Bazar où rien n'est en pierre', which plays on literal and figurative meanings. Stating that the place is not stone is an indirect way of saying how full of life it is, whilst simultaneously lamenting the lack of stone buildings—an echo of the contemporary tendency to lament the prevalence of plaster façades.[22] The emphasis on the superficiality of the urban fabric is amplified by 'bazar', which refers to the commercial face of a city rapidly turning into a vast shop window. Corbière hints at environmental determinism, for the artifice of this setting may explain the inauthenticity of the posing poet. The experience of moving around the city is evoked in a similarly compressed way:

> — Courage! On fait queue… Un planton
> Vous pousse à la chaîne — derrière! —
> … Incendie éteint, sans lumière;
> Des seaux passent, vides ou non. — (5–8)

The queue transmutes into a chain of fire-fighters, which combines a sense of urgency with a suggestion of a crowd (one of the rare instances when Corbière uses this emerging literary theme). It also recalls the fires of the Commune, a recent memory when the poem was written, and the evidence of the many buildings burnt down would still have been visible when Corbière arrived in Paris. This sonnet conveys the poet's difficulty in deciphering the shifting bazaar which is Paris, and the subsequent poems follow the Balzacian model of explaining its mysterious ways and stripping away illusions.

The rest of the sequence homes in on the bohemian milieu, as two voices discuss the practical details of becoming a poet. The conversation takes place in a café setting. From this point onwards, the communicative situation is blurred as the narrative unfolds across a dialogue between two voices, a naive aspiring poet and a more experienced cynic. Despite the elliptic language, it is not difficult to identify the protagonists as types engaging in a routine which is familiar from novels (Desgenais advising Octave in Musset's *Confession d'un enfant du siècle*, or Vautrin tempting Rastignac in Balzac's *Le Père Goriot*). Corbière's narrative

[22] For instance, Victor Hugo writes in *Notre-Dame de Paris*: 'Nos pères avaient un Paris de pierre; nos fils auront un Paris de plâtre', *Romans*, i. 287. See Philippe Hamon, *Expositions: Littérature et architecture au XIXe siècle* (Paris: Corti, 1989), 137.

is conveyed across a series of exclamations, commands and questions, interspersed with stage instructions. Metaphors are imprinted with expressive intonation, so lines like 'Là: vivre à coups de fouet!' perform the frenzied atmospheres they depict.[23] The narrative is a performance in itself, and the dialogue is a debate about what is to be done in the future rather than a narration of a past story. The imperatives, the 'il faut', and the emphasis on the second person pronoun underline the persuasive function. The full force of the dense network of images and wordplay emerges only through the interaction between the two semi-embodied voices, which represent contradictory aspects of the poet.

'Paris' II sets up the contrast between the two voices and breaks down the chaotic setting of 'Paris' I into more specific points of view which conflict with one another. It takes up the sensations of urban activity from 'Paris' I. 'Vivre à coups de fouet' combines literal cracks of the whip, a realistic detail hinting at traffic in a street scene, with figurative meanings of excitement or violent criticism. It functions as an objective correlative for the destructive yet stimulating Parisian life. This looks like a continuation of the hectic swirl of 'Paris' I, but the unconjugated infinitives suggest longing, so the lifestyle is now viewed through an optic of subjective aspiration instead of sympathetic detachment. The language of frenzy turns to thoughts of death, expressed wittily through the wordplay of 'se dépasser, et trépasser!…' (4). The confusion of the first poem was a reaction to the physical sensation of moving around the city, but the divergent points of view now represent contrasting evaluative perspectives, similar to those in 'Convoi du pauvre'. The lightness of tone undercuts the poet's solemn intensity from within, and the suicidal tendency parodies the bohemian cliché of death as a sign of genius.[24]

The irony is confirmed when the cynical voice patronizingly interrupts the 'petit' to propose less melodramatic paths to notoriety:

> — Non, petit, il faut commencer
> Par être grand — simple ficelle —
> Pauvre : remuer l'or à la pelle;
> Obscur : un nom à tout casser!… (5–8)

The cynical voice uses a cocktail of idealism and cynicism to play on the hopes of the unknown poet. 'Pauvre' in the first sonnet expressed pity

[23] 'Paris' II, 1.

[24] The story of Chatterton's suicide, as told in Vigny's play *Chatterton*, gave this ambition mythic status.

on the part of the narrator, but is now used more specifically to indicate the poet's financial plight. The cynic appears to be uttering paradoxes, redefining poverty as a positive feature by juxtaposing it with gold, but this reflects the bohemian logic that material suffering is a sign of genius, a logic that produced what Bourdieu describes as 'un monde économique à l'envers', the emerging autonomous field of art.[25] Similarly, obscurity is quite literally a value in this context, since innovation is brought about by newcomers who are 'voués à déconcerter par leur "obscurité" '.[26] The ideological reversal by which unrecognized poets projected themselves as noble martyrs is here exposed as a 'simple ficelle', by which it is implied that they were making a virtue out of a necessity.

The cynic advocates promoting oneself with a sensational name, but this strategy quickly degenerates into circus:

> Le coller chez les mastroquets,
> Et l'apprendre à des perroquets
> Qui le chantent ou qui le sifflent… (9–11)

Whistling would remove language from the performance altogether, and Corbière's parrot is an interesting variation on the topos of the artist as prostitute or *saltimbanque*. It neatly combines overtones of automatized reproduction with fears that the artist is a mere clown performing at the behest of an ignorant public. Indeed, the poet of *Les Amours jaunes* is haunted by a fear of parotting learnt routines. While scornful of cliché, he is nonetheless fascinated by it, and this paradoxical stance is something he shares with Flaubert, an author who famously gave a key role to a parrot in *Un cœur simple*. Corbière takes up the parrot theme again in 'Portes et fenêtres' when the poet describes himself as 'serinant mes sérénades' (15). The wordplay associates 'serinant', derived from 'serin' (canary), with the serenades so they are reduced to a parrot-like repetition. Anxiety of influence finds an outlet in mockery of tradition. In 'Paris' II, the budding poet is mocked for not recognizing the dangers of repetition, and misinterprets such strategies as promising musical purity. The cynic undercuts such hopes by emphasizing that this is a paradise 'des dieux souteneurs qui se giflent!' (14). In an era characterized by individualism, the godlike poet of Romantic myth is lowered to the status of a pimp forced to send his shivering Muse on to the streets, and reduced to fist fighting. Art, religion, and prostitution

[25] *Les Règles de l'art*, 139. [26] Ibid. 393.

are telescoped, but without any of the spirituality which is a component of Baudelaire's 'sainte prostitution'.

'Paris' III underlines the artificiality of the literary pose, by having the cynical voice summarize the variety of postures open to the budding poet. The very plurality of options underlines the superficiality of each, and the spontaneous *Naïf* is singled out for a more detailed attack. A naive voice innocently blunders into the poem with snatches of the folk song 'À la claire fontaine'. This serves as another foil for the cynical mentor, enabling him to expound an aesthetics of artifice and pessimism, rejecting nature and reducing love to deflowering, whereas the original naive speaker resurfaces to approve the rustic simplicity as '— Nature!' (12).

'Paris' IV intensifies the clash between the interlocutors:

> J'aimais… — Oh, ça n'est plus de vente!
> Même il faut payer; dans le tas,
> Pioche la femme! — Mon amante
> M'avais dit : « Je n'oublîrais pas… » (1–4)

The themes of love, poetry, and money are all collapsed onto each other. Romantic versifying of love can no longer sell, and love itself is something that can be bought. The naive speaker's fascination with bohemian orgy in 'Paris' II is now complemented by a melancholy nostalgia for his provincial origins. The comic exaggeration of the cynic and the naivety of his interlocutor emerge as equally unappealing, so neither wins out. The cynic is as limited as the innocent aspiration of the poet he is mocking. They represent two halves of the divided poet, in an extension of Baudelaire's practice of using different characters to represent aspects of the fragmented poet.[27]

The competing points of view become increasingly inextricable. In 'Paris' V the cynical voice begins to eclipse the naive voice with its recipe for success. It advocates joining in the vogue for cynicism: 'Jette le vin, garde la lie…' (10). 'Infect! Ah splendide' (13) equates positive and negative evaluations, eradicating any sense of stable values. In 'Paris' VI the cynical voice returns to the discourse of frenzy first used in 'Paris' II when the naive poet expressed a desire to live 'à coups de fouet', but this time with even more ironic distance. 'Évohé! Misère: Éblouir!' (2) juxtaposes the orgiastic cry 'Évohé' with the reality of 'misère', which itself is equated with 'Éblouir', in a variation on

[27] In prose poems such as 'Le Mauvais Vitrier' and 'Les Vocations'.

the paradoxical line in 'Paris' II: 'Pauvre: remuer l'or à la pelle' (7). The poet's progress is charted by a theatrical analogy which extends across sonnets VI and VII, a performance within an already theatrical context. The artist parades himself to a derisive audience, and takes on the aspect of a clown.[28] 'Paris' VII is a patchwork of traditional symbols for the poet: Prometheus, the soaring eagle of Romantic cliché, the pelican of Musset's 'Nuits', and the swan. Prometheus and the pelican in particular represent the sacrificial aspect of the poetic myth. The multiplication of Promethean figures suggests a crowd and hence the democratization of art. The *poète maudit* cliché is vastly overdetermined in these two poems, as expressions of failure are piled on. The audience throws things at the performer, the 'fruits secs' do not just signify failure (according to a colloquial expression) but are mouldering into the bargain, and even the poet's swansong is excruciating. The cynical voice has literally described the path towards an 'apothéose', yet is saying quite the opposite, that the inevitable outcome is failure and self-destruction. He is both telling the naive poet that his idealistic dreams are unrealistic, and pointing out that those he wishes to emulate have redefined apparent failure as success. The poems show that such martyrdom is not noble but ridiculous and morbid. Romantic nostalgia for bohemian ideals is countered by the reality of a market mentality.

'Paris' VIII opens by indicating the naive figure's laughter:

> Tu ris. — Bien! — Fais de l'amertume,
> Prends le pli, Méphisto blagueur.
> De l'absinthe! Et ta lèvre écume…
> Dis que cela vient de ton cœur. (1–4)

This could indicate that he is approving this sinister ending as the glorious death of a genius, or that he has assumed an ironic grimace. The cynical voice addresses his interlocutor as 'Méphisto blagueur' (2), so the dreamer has become a likeness of the diabolic mentor. The cynic initially seemed to be offering an alternative to death but leads back to this inevitable end (though it is not even clear what sort of a choice is offered in the final tercets, or indeed whether it is a choice) so the two voices echo each other in a cycle of escalating violence. Thematically they are collapsed on to each other, as well as in language. The cynic

[28] A topos analysed in Jean Starobinski, *Portrait de l'artiste en saltimbanque* (Geneva: Skira, 1970).

advocates an aesthetic of impersonality, and simultaneously plays on the Romantic aesthetic of self-expression:

> Fais de toi ton œuvre posthume,
> Châtre l'amour… l'amour — longueur!
> Ton poumon cicatrisé hume
> Des miasmes de gloire, ô vainqueur! (5–8)

Lamartine's metaphor of using one's *fibres* as a lyre is converted into literal medical terms.[29] This also deromanticizes the myth of dying for one's art, as initially expressed by the naive voice. The beginning and end of the story are collapsed onto each other, and this is emphasized by the double temporal structure of the sequence: the dialogue stages the poet embarking on his cynical pose, and at the end he is told to start practising his pose, which is in effect the beginning of the story.

At first, irony results from the contrast between the two voices, but at the end they fuse in a single ironic discourse which juxtaposes lyrical idealism with medical reality. The bohemian *blague* reverses values, but Corbière reverses the reversal by juxtaposing the vocabulary of bohemian heroism with realistic discourse. As Jonathan Culler points out, irony 'is itself a process of signification' and also 'works to undermine other types of signification'.[30] Corbière's irony is particularly hard to pin down, as he undermines types of signification which are already ironic and full of reversals. Both the discourse of the *blague* and the myth of the artist as noble martyr are responses to social changes, and Corbière problematizes them both. Conflicting norms coincide, and there is no reliable voice to offer conclusive evaluations. As Jankélévitch points out, 'L'ironie [. . .] organise la concurrence de toutes les valeurs pour n'avoir pas à opter'.[31] The poet is constantly judged according to norms which are themselves being undercut. For instance, the poet is instructed on how to fit into the bohemian milieu, but the poems themselves mock this environment. The sonnets stage the poet's struggle to locate himself in a literary scene, and enact its ferment of bohemian delusion, cut-throat competition, and aristocratic idealism. This reflects the difficulty of deciding whether

[29] Lamartine writes in a preface to his *Méditations*: 'Je suis le premier qui ait fait descendre la poésie du Parnasse, et qui ait donné à ce qu'on nommait la Muse, au lieu d'une lyre à sept cordes de convention, les fibres mêmes du cœur de l'homme, tronchées et émues par les innombrables frissons de l'âme et de la nature', Lamartine, *Méditations* (Paris: Garnier, 1968), 303.

[30] Jonathan Culler, *The Pursuit of Signs* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981), 36.

[31] *L'Ironie*, 157.

isolation and obscurity are signs of failure, or proof of a superior art that an undiscriminating audience is incapable of understanding. Corbière criticizes the commerciality of the Parisian bazaar yet mocks the muse for being unable to sell herself. The 'Paris' sonnets are shot through with all the ambivalence of the nineteenth-century man of letters noted by Walter Benjamin: 'he goes to the marketplace as a flâneur, supposedly to take a look at it, but in reality to find a buyer.'[32]

These intersecting views of the artistic world are dramatized by the dialogue between the two conflicting voices. The circular movement of a sequence that begins and ends with death emphasizes that they are two halves of a divided subjectivity. Whereas the first sonnet had reported the situation from the outside, by the end we see the situation from within. The naive poet is only present in the many second-person pronouns in the ironic utterance of the cynic, and his voice has been absorbed into that of the cynical performer. The 'Paris' sonnets stage the assumption of the pose and show how the oxymoronic style emerges from two conflicting aspects of the self. The pose is represented by the layering of different voices. The poet addresses himself in the second person and commands the posing self to do things as if it were an artificial puppet. This emphasizes the self-division that posing entails, and is also a way of dramatizing inner conflict whilst avoiding introspection.

The 'Paris' sequence also throws doubt on the irony which characterizes the whole book. Since the cynical *blagueur* advises the ingénu to cultivate bitter laughter in order to ensure fame and fortune, it is implied that the *rire jaune* is faked and forced out of a desire to be fashionable and to guarantee sales. This is an acknowledgement that the poet knows he is not the first to debunk Romanticism, even if elsewhere he boasts of his iconoclasm. Furthermore, even laughter seems to have been commodified, which further taints the yellow of the *rire jaune*, although the effect is not so much to undermine laughter itself, as to demonstrate that laughter, like lyricism, cannot escape the all-pervasive influence of capitalism. The character of the *blagueur* mocks his pose for being contrived, and the overall effect of the poem is to send up the concept of the *blague*. The poems thus invite us to laugh at laughter itself, enacting the very mechanism of the *rire jaune*. They simultaneously question the humour of the whole of *Les Amours jaunes*, so the sequence functions as a further framing device for the book.

[32] Walter Benjamin, *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism*, trans. Harry Zohn (London: New Left Books, 1973), 34.

NAPLES: UNRAVELLING THE POSE

Poems representing artist figures are primarily set in Paris, but at the end of the 'Raccrocs' section there is a group of poems set in Italy describing a journey which was *de rigueur* for a man of letters. These may have been written before the Paris poems, as Corbière made his journey there in the winter of 1869–70 before moving to Paris in 1871, but convey a similar disenchantment. They discredit the Romantic clichés associated with idealized representations of Italy, and evoke the difficulty of portraying the myth afresh. The densest of these poems, 'Veder Napoli poi mori', offers a striking variation on the urban theme, as it explores the relationship between poet and street scene in a more intricate way than 'Idylle coupée'. This effect of complexity results from its elaborate rhetorical situation. A poet describes how his arrival in Naples degenerates into farce when customs officers search his luggage, and the *lazzaroni* (Neapolitan vagabonds whose freedom was eulogized by Romantic poets such as Lamartine and Musset) steal his bag. This poet persona ironically undercuts clichés of the Italian journey, yet the poem is simultaneously unravelling his pose. This multi-layered poem incorporates more perspectives than a conventional linear oral utterance would permit. Furthermore, it is exceptional in that there are four known versions in existence.[33] A comparison of these variants reveals that Corbière systematically rendered the rhetorical situation more complex in the course of composition. Ironic discontinuities were heightened to explore the contradictions of the artist grappling with the impossibility of unmediated description. The first version is a direct linear utterance by a voice rooted in one place. Irony results from the naive visitor enthusing over an Italian scene which persistently contradicts his illusions and interferes with his performance. This spontaneity is attenuated in the final version, which is encrusted with details and accumulates puns which

[33] Given the lack of material shedding light on the genesis of *Les Amours jaunes*, it is fortunate that there are four versions. Three are given in *OC* and the fourth is transcribed in the Appendix below. The latter, a manuscript held by the Bibliothèque Municipale de Morlaix, is probably the earliest. It is shorter than the version thought to be the earliest when reproduced in *OC*: the manuscript originally published by Martineau in 1904, which is thus probably the second of the four versions. A third version appeared in *La Vie parisienne* on 24 May 1873. Although this was after *Les Amours jaunes* went to press (17 May 1873), it is only five quatrains long and looks like an intermediate version between the manuscript published by Martineau and the text in *Les Amours jaunes*. The most elaborate version is that in *Les Amours jaunes*.

underline the ironic reflection. The fragmented voice appears to speak at different levels and in different times and places simultaneously, and the layers make it difficult to read as the notation of an oral performance.

The successive changes made to the opening of the poem are particularly striking in this respect, and show how the rhetorical situation was made progressively more complex. The Morlaix manuscript begins thus:

> *Italia salve!* (coupons dans l'Italie).

The apostrophe roots the speaker geographically, and his monologic voice responds emotively to the setting, only to undercut with a more cynical aside: the figurative expression *couper dans quelque chose*, originally a gambling term, means to fall into a trap or to be caught out by something. The second version exacerbates the cynicism by starting on the derisive note, taking the cliché 'see Naples and die' literally:

> Ici l'on peut mourir, c'est Naples, l'Italie!

In the third version the speaker distances himself from the cliché, by quoting it in full and then citing himself as living evidence of its absurdity. He now seems to be in dialogue with an external voice:

> Voir Naples et mourir. — Moi, j'en reviens [. . .].

The final version dramatizes the witticism still further:

> Voir Naples et… — Fort bien, merci, j'en viens.

The joke is no longer addressed directly to the reader by the speaker, but is incorporated into a scene played out before us. The cynic interrupts a voice uttering the cliché, pointing out that he has returned from Naples in good health. Truncating the expression serves to reinforce its formulaic nature, as only two words are necessary for it to be instantly recognizable. The truncation invites the reader to finish the phrase, giving him or her a sense of cultural superiority, before going on to mock that satisfaction. The phrase 'Voir Naples et… ' hangs without being attributable to a particular speaker, but the poet's response to it has the accent of living speech. It belongs in the discourse of social formality, for it sounds like a reply to the question 'comment allez vous?', which has not actually been posed, although the thematic link between death and health makes the connection perfectly logical. The speaker is now far from the Neapolitan quay, but is instead striking the pose of a seasoned traveller in company. The cliché 'see Naples and die' is inserted into the banal conversation where it belongs, and such automatic use of language is hence the first

object of attack. The idealized vision of Italy is directly associated with a world of social artifice, and the joke permits the speaker both to show off his own wit and to mock the implied company. This introduction to a humorous poem invites us to read the whole as an account contrived for the trivial entertainment of just such a social gathering.[34] The present tense of 'j'en viens' opens up a gap between the present utterance and the past events in Italy and makes the performance a self-conscious restaging of the original experience. The speaker plays on the uncertain distance between speaking self and travelling self to make it undecidable whether the poet-tourist's naivety is being retrospectively mocked or whether he is a blasé figure who greeted events with knowing irony. He thus covers his own traces while appearing to expose them, and the idea of the poem as a notation of an utterance from a particular moment is undercut.

The poem as a whole dramatizes the tension between the poet's foreknowledge and his naivety. It is loaded with references to existing representations of Italy. The poet alludes to fictional characters, such as Mme de Staël's Corinne and Goethe's Mignon, in exclamations which suggest the disparity between the ideal and reality. The incongruous juxtaposition of noble literary antecedents and trivial reality is emphasized in later versions by wordplay, since the sound of 'malle' echoes that of Mme de Staël. This is particularly irreverent given that the sound also produces the rhyme 'sale'. Her name is given in the second version, but in *Les Amours jaunes* merely hovers behind the line as an unverbalized presence.[35] 'Veder Napoli' also uses more general clichés such as the picturesque scenery. The static verblessness of the opening description—the accumulation of blueness with 'bleu-perruquier', 'indigo', 'ne-m'oubliez-pas' and 'outremer' is the verbal equivalent of a painted backdrop. The poet is jaded by prior acquaintance with imitations, a theme which is given a more positive twist in 'Vésuves et C^{ie}', which shows how representations of Vesuvius lodged in the memory have personal associations more powerful than the impressions left by a visit to the volcano itself.

[34] The version which appeared in *La Vie parisienne* does not look out of place amidst the pages of frivolous society articles on the subject of holidays.

[35] In 'Calembour et création poétique chez Tristan Corbière', *Cahiers de l'Iroise*, 8/1 (Jan.–Mar. 1961), 1–8, Sonnenfeld argues that this wordplay was the inspiration behind the whole section, in line with his theory that the origin of Corbière's poems was generally a set of sound associations, which were then hidden in the process of composition. However, the Mme de Staël joke is not included in the Morlaix manuscript which has more recently come to light, so it seems to have been added and then removed at an intermediate stage of composition.

The poet's monologue in its final version no longer just sketches events, but artifice pervades at all levels, so even the realistic details take on a stilted, stagy aspect. Knowledge of existing representations is projected onto the present, so it seems artificial too. The overall texture is contradictory as Corbière simultaneously points out that reality falls short of the ideal, mocks the ideal for its stereotypical artifice, and mocks the real by making it as artificial as the ideal (the customs officers declaim theatrically). The first version introduced the customs officers by saying that artists literally forget to declare their luggage, implying that when overawed one forgets practical details. The last version works this up into an aesthetic statement that artists forget to *describe* the practical details. The customs officers are ostensibly brought in as an incongruous realistic detail, yet at a humorous level they only reinforce the clichés of Italian beauty:

> Ô Mignon!… ils ont tout éclos mon linge sale
> Pour le passer au bleu de l'éternel printemps! (7–8)

'Mignon', the Goethe character who yearns for her Italian homeland, has associations of dreamy otherworldliness, which contrast sharply with the intrusive customs officers.[36] However, double meanings then project the sanitizing duties of the latter onto the idealized beauty of Italy. The past participle 'éclos', unexpectedly used intransitively, describes the humiliating search through his luggage as though this were a pastoral scene of blossoming flowers.[37] 'Passer au bleu', meaning 'launder', puns on the stereotypical blue sky. 'Passer au bleu' also means 'make disappear' and thus anticipates the ultimate theft of the luggage. Corbière's rewriting of the poem demonstrates the importance that such associative patterns had for him.[38]

[36] Her yearning is famously evoked in Goethe's poem 'Kennst du das, Land wo die Zitronen blühn', to which Corbière makes direct allusion in earlier versions of 'Veder Napoli poi mori'. In the Morlaix version, the lemons are attributed to Schiller: 'O caisse d'orangers! (Schiller dit: citronniers)'. Whether the misattribution is deliberate or not, the second version omits the name and reworks the citrus joke as: 'O caisse d'orangers qui sont des citronniers!'

[37] The conjunction of flowers, clothes, and sky recalls the beginning of Ronsard's Ode XVII: 'Mignonne, allons voir si la rose | Qui ce matin avoit desclose | Sa robe de pourpre au Soleil', *Œuvres completes*, Pléiade (Paris: Gallimard, 1950), 419.

[38] In the first version the verb used for unfolding the washing was 'effeuillé', which literally denotes the opposite of 'éclos', but its associations of foliage fit in with the adjacent reference to laurels. In later versions the laurels are suppressed and the verb only appears further on, in the form 'effeuillant'.

The final version also reports the utterances of the customs officers, which further blur the rhetorical situation:

> Ils demandent la *main*… et moi je la leur serre!
> Le portrait de ma Belle, avec *morbidezza*
> Passe de mains en mains : l'inspecteur sanitaire
> L'ausculte, et me sourit… trouvant *que c'est bien ça!* (9–12)

The speaker responds to the customs officers' words 'Ils demandent la *main*…' by shaking their hands, a non-verbal communication which is inspired by a verbal witticism. The idiom for a formal marriage offer is made to look strange by being taken out of context, as the hand seems to be disembodied rather than symbolic. This impression is reinforced when a hand is physically offered in response, a gesture which both mocks the preciosity of the formula, and contests the customs officers. Wordplay is not just an embellishment after the event, but is projected back into the original episode. The speaker throws the phrase back at his tormentors, for he does not answer in the same terms as the request: rather than giving or refusing his hand, he seizes theirs. The caesura severs the advance from the retort, in the binary alexandrine so often used by Corbière for contradictory movements. However, the gesture could indicate that hands are being shaken over a deal and thus express acquiescence. The poet simultaneously contradicts their meaning and accepts their offer, in an ironic double movement. Furthermore, the expression *demander la main* was not pertinent, for the bartering is over nothing so formal as marriage. The hand is further degraded when the portrait of the traveller's lover 'passe de mains en mains' in an exchange which mimics that of prostitution. The reference to the sanitary officer hints at the reality of regulating such trade, and further contaminates the notion of cleansing suggested by the laundry image. The woman features only as a painting, and is thus yet another representation. Even the actions of the customs officers are qualified with the technical term *morbidezza*, which refers to delicacy and grace in a painting. This is burlesque when applied to these coarse figures rather than the portrait itself, especially as it rhymes with the oral phrase '*que c'est bien ça*'.

This is a virtuoso play on terms not only of different registers but which belong in contrasting communicative situations. '*Morbidezza*' is the narrator's flourish, which exaggerates the artifice of his own depiction, whilst mocking his tormentors with terms that are apparently

beyond them. *C'est bien ça* is an everyday phrase,[39] whose force and meaning are largely determined by its intonation, a quality brought out in Nathalie Sarraute's play *Pour un oui ou pour un non*, which hinges on the misunderstanding caused by a protagonist pausing fractionally too long between 'bien' and 'ça' and thus insinuating an insult into what should have been an expression of approval.[40] Corbière's '*que*' amplifies the evaluative force and also makes the rhythm of '*morbidezza*' echo that of '*que c'est bien ça*' exactly. We have already seen how Corbière establishes parallels between utterances of very different orders, as in 'Au vieux Roscoff', but here the technique is put to more sophisticated use as the full significance of the pairing only emerges when the lines are read aloud. Since the italics and context invite the reader to exaggerate the Italian pronunciation of '*morbidezza*', there is likely to be a corresponding exaggeration in the rhythm of '*que c'est bien ça*'. The resultant emphasis on '*bien*' will inevitably produce an insulting pause between '*bien*' and '*ça*'. The more the reader stresses the poet's conceit in '*morbidezza*', the more insulting the slight of '*que c'est bien ça*'. Thus the more the speaker parades the poet's virtuoso style, the more violently it rebounds on him in the rhyme. Although contrasting registers are juxtaposed, there is nothing so clear as reported speech or clearly delineated dialogue here. The contrast between the elevated and the trivial, when artistic refinement is ascribed to the customs officers, is a marker of irony, but it has no clearly defined target. Marriage is reduced to the level of prostitution, the customs officers are mocked for having delusions of grandeur, and the speaker's bombast verges on the ridiculous. It is impossible to decide whether he is directly quoting his interlocutors to mock their pretensions, or whether he is describing them in terms they could not have used in order to reveal their ignorance. The speaker attacks the clichés of Romanticism by focusing on the mundane figures normally omitted in idealized portrayals, yet in turn falls into the trap of mocking them as philistines, only to have the rhythm turn the mockery back against himself with an added barb in '*que c'est bien ça*'.

The fourth stanza is another late addition which amplifies the speaker's inner division. He actively reflects on the disparity between his illusions and the reality assailing him. The explicit presentation of the mission which brought him to Naples, and analysis of his encounter with the

[39] Also used in 'Le Convoi du Pauvre', 13.
[40] Nathalie Sarraute, *Pour un oui un pour un non* (Paris: Gallimard, 1982), 47.

customs officers, is the nearest the poem comes to directly addressing the reader:

> Je venais pour chanter leur illustre guenille,
> Et leur chantage a fait de moi-même un haillon!
> Effeuillant mes faux-cols, l'un d'eux m'offre sa fille…
> Effeuillant le faux-col de mon illusion! (13–16)

The poet-tourist explains that he has come to praise the renowned vagabonds of Naples. In the first draft the speaker identifies with them at first sight ('Ah voici mes amis, les seigneurs lazzaronis') but the final version soberly notes them as a received idea before letting the elegy fly. The poet is indirectly identified with the ragged lazzaroni because he feels the customs officers have treated him like one. He is not aware that the disparity between his sartorial concerns and their elemental condition is a source of comedy. The relationship is no longer one of active identification, but is a parallel suggested through imagery. The imagery constructs the poet, instead of him being the lyric source performing it. The rest of the quatrain repeats the substance of the anecdote in order to interpret it, but it is the underlying imagery and patterns of wordplay which provide the organic thread now: laundry which had previously appeared as a humorous metonymic fixture (7) is now made an explicit metaphor for his disillusionment. The illusions are made light of since they spring from the internal structure of the word 'faux-col', with its connotations of triviality and fakeness. The laundry images ironically build up to the entrance of the lazzaroni by foreshadowing their dirty raggedness. The verb *effeuiller* had in the earliest version featured in the leafy second stanza, but ends up in a different context here, where its connotations of denudation echo the rags of the lazzaroni. The 'effeuillant' images of lines 15–16 literally enact the statement 'Et leur chantage a fait de moi-même un haillon'. The notion is introduced figuratively before being shown concretely, so again disillusion with the myth is latent before the lazzaroni appear. It is the very puns showing the Italian myth to be illusory that also usher in the exaltation of the lazzaroni. The disparity between the wardrobe vocabulary and the elemental rags of the lazzaroni underlines the comedy of the pampered poet's preoccupation with his laundry items. The speaker uses puns to show off his wit at given points, and yet the general undertow in larger sections of the text escapes the control of even this highly self-conscious speaking voice.

The speaker does not use a unified tone to argue with an incremental movement, but the poem is punctuated with abrupt changes in gear, so that the overall texture verges on a patchwork like that of 'Paris'. This fragmented surface is more marked in the final version than in the earlier drafts. The lyrical outburst of stanzas 5–7 is ironized from within by the exaggerated poetic tropes. The opening '— Naples!' uses the direct invocation of the surroundings which began the first version of the poem, but now in the form of 'speech within speech'. A series of oxymoronic structures glorifies the sordid laziness of the lazzaroni. The images were reworked in the course of composition so 'Des poëtes aussi, leurs poux sont leurs couronnes' became the more intense 'Polichinelles-Dieux, Rois pouilleux sur leurs trônes' (19) and 'Clyso-pompant l'azur qui baîlle dans leur ciel' became the less literal 'Clyso-pompant l'azur qui bâille leur sommeil!' (20). The discourse builds to a rhetorical peak in a parodic simulation of the poet being carried away by his own lyrical excess.

The flight spills over into the eighth stanza, only to be abruptly broken off with the exclamation 'Non! c'est mon sac!… ' (29). The positioning of this interruption at the apparent climax heightens its irony. The poetic performance is rudely interrupted by the invasion of the object upon whose absence it is centred; narrative time now suddenly coincides with story time and the speaker is forced back into the eyewitness mode which had dominated the first version. However, the startling images belie the immediacy of the exclamation. The language of the poem appears to be operating independently of the speaker, and strange puns give a sense of detachment from the world. The image 'il nage | Parmi ces asticots, comme un chien crevé' (29–30) is disturbing, as the grammatical structure makes the bag the centre of interest, yet it is only because the swarming lazzaroni resemble maggots that the bag can be described as a dead dog. It is not the verb that drives the sense, and causality is suppressed. The shift from praising to blaming the lazzaroni is thrown in, rather than foregrounded as a proposition in itself, suggesting that such misgivings can never have been far from the surface. The reversal is all the more incongruous given that only two lines previously the lazzaroni had been 'frères adorés'. The bags themselves are emblematic of the poet's cultural baggage. His false collars had already been associated with his illusions, and the inertia of his trunk suggests the dead weight of the ideals which haunt him, although the paradoxical movement of the trunk in line 32 suggests that the illusions are slipping away. The surreal effect is compounded by the cheese image, which not only suggests that the maggots may be 'vers de

fromage' but also plays on the colloquial expression *trouver un fromage*, meaning to find a lucrative situation. The trunk obviously represents a *fromage* for the lazzaroni, as they are Italians profiting from their mythic scenery. Once again, poetry is tainted by financial concerns, a theme which runs through the Italian poems, notably 'Le Fils de Lamartine et Graziella', in which a descendant of Lamartine takes the commercial exploitation of poetry to industrial levels.[41]

The last stanza sidesteps the question of illusions by playfully moving to a cosmic level:

> — Ne ruolze plus ça, toi, grand Astre stupide!
> Tas de pâles voyous grouillant à se nourrir;
> Ce n'est plus le lézard, c'est la sangsue à vide…
> — Dernier *lazzarone* à moi la [*sic*] bon Dormir! (33–6)

Grojnowski suggests that the transfiguration of the corpse image is inspired by Baudelaire's 'Une charogne'.[42] The speaker is so saturated with the poetry he has previously read that his Neapolitan observations call to mind an entirely alien Baudelairian image, and one which imports the idea of death. The disproportion between the trivial event and the portentous exclamation inspired by this intertext compounds the impression of the poet as a figure of fun, and his metaphysical terms are humorously undercut by the baldly scientific register. His tone becomes petulant, and the poem ends with him threatening to kill a lazzarone, referring to death with the childish euphemism 'bon Dormir'. The last line sounds like the challenging cry which launches a game, and in fact represents a witty return to the initial joke. The first version ended with the poet telling himself to go to sleep instead of seeing Naples, which sounds like joining in with the lazzaroni's *far-niente*, whereas the last version sets him apart from them, first as a mock philosopher and then as a child. The poem as a whole is framed by a circular joke (a familiar pattern in *Les Amours jaunes*) leading from 'voir Naples' to 'bon Dormir'.

The poet identifies with the lazzaroni in a Baudelairian stance of observing third parties who echo his own concerns, but this connection is undercut by their invading his privacy. The poet is not free to exploit the scene for his own ends, since it fights back. This dramatic irony was

[41] Corbière was not the first to make this sort of criticism of Lamartine. Walter Benjamin gives examples of how Lamartine was accused of flagrantly marketing himself in poetry, in *Charles Baudelaire*, 32.

[42] Bibliothèque Nationale, *Les Plus Beaux Manuscrits des poètes français*, 244.

stepped up in the course of composition, for in the last version the poet invests more in his identification with the lazzaroni before they get their revenge. Furthermore, the parallel between himself and the lazzaroni is not negated by their misbehaviour, but persists with the more damning implication that he is out for personal gain just as much as they are. Not only does the poet peddle clapped-out idealistic visions, but he is responsible for commodifying experience. In this poem both parties are plundering each other.

'Veder Napoli poi mori' is no account of gradual disillusionment, because the speaker was disillusioned from the start. The first version relied on an opposition between an idealistic poet and a realistic scene. The final version is more complex, for the anecdotal framework is retained but irony permeates the verbal texture at all levels. It does not just target illusions but ricochets in all directions. The speaker in the first version is aware from the start that the whole thing is a sham, yet retains an air of gullible ingenuity so that he can be repeatedly knocked down, whereas in the last version he is aware that the whole undertaking was deluded from the outset. Events only feed his disillusion, yet the story is told as though at any given moment there might be further illusions to peel away.

The speaker, although boasting an ironic tone, is frequently undercut by the language. Imagery and puns are beyond his control and build up proliferating layers of irony. The pose of the retrospective speaking poet is superimposed on that of the travelling poet and it is difficult to hook any given utterance to a particular moment. Corbière repeatedly profits from the shock effects of undercutting illusions, whilst at the same time showing that the poet is disillusioned from the start. He ironizes a figure who is ironically telling a story about an episode apparently experienced with ironic distance in the first place. Orality has become one effect amongst others incorporated into a writerly text, but is nonetheless powerful enough to suggest the vestiges of a theatrical performer hovering behind the writing. The speaker is both a parodied Romantic writer profiting from the Italian picturesque and being mocked by the lazzaroni getting their own back, and is a modern realist poet who tries to reject clichés, but constantly slips back into them. The poem is another example of a montage of different kinds of poet, and an expansion of the paradoxical self-definition 'trop naïf, étant trop cynique'.[43]

[43] 'Épitaphe', 45.

THE POET'S SELF-DIVISION

Corbière does not merely stage monologues by poet personae, but frequently evokes artists obliquely or weaves their voices into dense verbal structures, notably in 'La Pipe au poète' and 'Le Crapaud'. In this pair of poems the poet's personality is difficult to pin down, and he is also removed from a realistic environment. Whereas 'Veder Napoli poi mori' uses concrete reality to undercut idealized representations, these texts humorously depict contradictions in the myth of the poet, drawing on stock symbolic material but using the realistic technique of multiple perspectives to transform it.

In Chapter 1 I cited the speaking pipe in 'La Pipe au poète' as an example of the unreliable *je lyrique*, and we have seen how many poems create similar effects without the motivation of devices as transparent as a speaking pipe. However, I now want to return to 'La Pipe au poète' and analyse the pipe's role more carefully, because this voice must be read in relation to the whole poem, whose multiple layers convey much about the condition of the artist. 'La Pipe au poète' rewrites Baudelaire's sonnet 'La Pipe', collapsing it into an idiosyncratic stanzaic pattern and developing the humorous potential of its rhetorical situation. Whereas the Baudelaire poem is spoken by the eponymous pipe, which refers to its master in tones of neutral respect, Corbière's speaking pipe hijacks the poem and reduces the artist to his dupe. By assuming the grammatical first person, his pipe gains the corresponding confidence of a Romantic *je lyrique*. The pipe mocks the dreaming poet, but the incongruity of a banal object having such a self-important tone makes it in turn an object of comedy. Every time the pipe deflates the poet, it simultaneously emphasizes its own ludicrous presumption. In the first line the pipe appropriates the capital 'P' and leaves the poet in the lower case. The capital is restored to the poet only in the penultimate line, and then only to call him patronizingly 'mon Pauvre'. This both intensifies the derogatory term, and acts as a reminder of the consecrated *Poète* status he falls short of, thus underlining the disparity between reality and an ideal.

The old verb 'piper' has the sense of 'deceive', and the pipe wittily goes on to present the poet's experience as a series of delusions:

> Quand ses chimères éborgnées
> Viennent se heurter à son front,
> Je fume… Et lui, dans son plafond,
> Ne peut plus voir les araignées. (3–6)

Chimères were a popular Romantic image for 'aspiration vers l'infini', but here they are literally one-eyed monsters. The pipe mutilates the Romantic cliché to assert a lucid awareness of the futility of art, and to display its own wit at the expense of the poet. However, the comic reworking of the image also vividly suggests the very real horror of nightmares. The nightmarish description recombines elements of Baudelaire's 'Spleen' poem 'Quand le ciel bas et lourd':[44]

> Quand la terre est changée en un cachot humide,
> Où l'Espérance, comme une chauve-souris,
> S'en va battant les murs de son aile timide
> Et se cognant la tête à des plafonds pourris
> . . . . . .
> Et qu'un peuple muet d'infâmes araignées
> Vient tendre ses filets au fond de nos cerveaux. (5–8, 11–12)

Corbière borrows the tangible images Baudelaire uses to suggest melancholy, and singles out the ceiling and spiders from which he conjures the colloquial expression 'avoir une araignée dans le plafond', meaning 'to have a screw loose'. He derides spleen as an object of comedy rather than lamenting it as a grave affliction. Similarly, lyrical flight is presented as a vain illusion rather than noble elevation and referred to in the third person rather than performed in the first:

> … Je lui fais un ciel, des nuages,
> La mer, le désert, des mirages;
> — Il laisse errer là son œil mort… (7–9)

The sea, sky, and desert are typical images of a Romantic *ailleurs*, and constitute a shorthand for lyricism. Words suggestive of the eternal are revealed to be part of a cultural code; they are quoted rather than used with their full weight. The vision is ironically framed by suspension points, but this truncation simultaneously suggests the unrealized possibility of a more sustained flight. Dream and reality are subtly fused, as the clouds of the vision emerge from the literal smoke, and this sky gives rise to a landscape whose mirages prefigure the illusion that the cloud is a lost lover. There is humour in the poet's only relaxing at the thought of a woman, and the pipe plays up the physical nature of the response. The dream is hardly mere escapism since it leads to an evocation of love as absence and loss. Sleep represents a release from the

[44] *Œuvres Complètes*, i. 24.

poet's *Bête*, and so is a way of transcending the discomfort of existence, even if it is only made possible by the artificial stimulant of the pipe (celebration of smoking was a frequent bohemian theme). The pipe both represents the reality from which the poet is escaping, and also provides the means of escape. The opposition of reality and ideal is fragmented through a poem in which nobody actively aspires to an ideal, but it nonetheless persists as a phantom presence. If the ideal was posited by the Romantics in response to an inadequate reality, Corbière returns to the reality to show why the flight was necessary. His description of sleep as a visual experience condensing the private and the panoramic is a realistic evocation of dream-work. The poem represents the conflict between the dreamer and the realist, both essential aspects of the poet. The pipe is aware that art is a vain illusion, and the dreamer is portrayed through the optic of the pipe, so his point of view is only presented indirectly. After the pipe has boasted of nursing the poet by feeding him delusions, it risks a final flourish of confident pretension which humorously undermines its own central role:

> Mon Pauvre!… la fumée est tout.
> — S'il est vrai que tout est fumée… (18–19)

This speculation activates a further literary intertext, by recalling the end of Saint-Amant's sonnet 'La Pipe', in which the smoker observes:

> Non, je ne trouve point beaucoup de différence
> De prendre du tabac à vivre d'espérance,
> Car l'un n'est que fumée, et l'autre n'est que vent.[45]

Corbière's humour has much in common with that of the seventeenth-century poem; both use the triviality of smoking to touch lightly on existential themes. However, Corbière's speaking pipe once again amplifies the humour of this conceit. Having paraded its power over the hapless poet, the pipe has underlined the vanity of art, but at the very end broadens this argument into a stereotypical meditation on the transitory and illusory nature of life itself. With this sweeping statement the pipe in effect undercuts its own much-vaunted authority, for it is as much a part of the all-encompassing 'tout' as the poet, and therefore itself illusory. This confirms that the pipe's performance is insubstantial, and invites us to turn our attention away from its limited judgements and focus instead on the poem as a

[45] Saint-Amant, *Œuvres poétiques*, ed. Léon Vérane (Paris: Garnier, 1930), 88.

multi-layered text which superimposes contradictory points of view. The pipe is a parodic subjective lyric 'I' which asserts its centrality, but the confident first person has become dissociated from the figure of the poet, who is represented within the poem as a rather elusive figure.

Indeed, it is uncertain what sort of a poet is represented, since the poem offers no definitive evaluation. As Corbière's pipe stridently exaggerates the manner of its Baudelairian model, it is tempting to view the poet as a shadow of Baudelaire himself. The progression from tortured dreams to lyrical flight certainly suggests the double postulation of *spleen* and *idéal*. As the pipe is more ironic than Baudelaire's, Corbière's tortured insomniac may be a correspondingly more splenetic version of Baudelaire. On the other hand, the pipe's derision suggests the poet is no more than an escapist dreamer.[46] Is the poet a Romantic visionary mocked by a short-sightedly prosaic pipe, or a drugged bohemian presented by a clear-sighted spokesman for the everyday? The undecidability suggests that there may be a fine line between grand visions and trivial pipe dreams, and embodies the uncertain nature of dreams which fuse fiction and reality. The paradigm of limited vision ('chimères éborgnées', 'ne peut plus voir', 'œil mort') implies that the poet persona himself has difficulty discriminating, but these evaluations may also reflect the distorted interpretation of the pipe. The cocksure pipe is a comic protagonist rather than a reliable source of evaluation, a lyric equivalent to the unreliable narrator. It confides in the reader behind the poet's back, but the poem in turn mocks the pipe, so we are ironically distanced from both pipe and poet, and cannot tell where the irony is coming from. Reverie and lucidity have become more incommensurable than in Baudelaire. This is a non-intellectual approach to the opposition of real and ideal, which is not experienced by an individual, but fragmented across the complementary halves of the poet: the romantic dreamer and the realistic pipe. As in 'Insomnie', the poet's existential suffering is conveyed through physical sensations. The poem's apparent disorder, underlined by its unconventional stanzaic structure, carefully orchestrates the hesitation between dream and reality.

The poet's inner division is also dramatized in the anthology piece 'Le Crapaud'. Its formal and thematic ironies are immediately obvious: it is a reversed sonnet which likens the poet to a toad in a version of the

[46] Marshall Lindsay sees the poet as sleepy and unproductive, *Le Temps jaune*, 7.

'artist as clown' topos.[47] It presents a Baudelairian scene in which the poet recognizes himself in the debased figure of the toad.[48] The theme is commonplace in the period but the oblique form of the analogy is original. The polyphony makes it unclear who is being ironic about what, or where the poet is to be located between the diverse voices. The toad image may be memorably vivid, and enhanced by the legend that Corbière kept a dead toad nailed above his door,[49] but in 'Le Crapaud' the poet is a more dispersed presence. The poem's irony is not simply an antiphrastic procedure, according to which the toad might be transformed back into a prince by the act of reading (the fairy tale 'The Frog Prince' is hovering behind the poem, along with the myth of the artist as unrecognized genius), but its irony stems from the relationship between the different voices.

There are in fact four separate voices. The first is the impersonal narrator of the opening five lines, who sets the scene with a description which is hard to read mimetically, because, as Marshall Lindsay points out, it is a montage of industrial and Romantic landscape items:[50]

> Un chant dans une nuit sans air…
> La lune plaque en métal clair
> Les découpures du vert sombre.
>
> … Un chant; comme un écho, tout vif
> Enterré, là, sous le massif… (1–5)

The elliptic language obscures both the speaker of the description and the source of the song, so the music is eerily suspended in the décor. The sound takes on a visual quality, since the noun 'chant' fixes the music as a landscape item as static as 'air' and 'lune'. When the song is pinpointed with the deictic 'là', the narrator and audience are simultaneously located spatially in relation to it, and the objective voice begins to seem more embodied. These opening lines also describe the second voice: the more persistently disembodied voice of the toad.

The poem then shifts into a dialogue between the third and fourth voices, belonging to two lovers. Their conversation centres on the toad, but makes it no easier to pin down. The man points to the toad first with '— Ça se tait: Viens, c'est là, dans l'ombre…' (6). The

[47] Hugo's toad in *La Légende des siècles* has been cited as a literary antecedent, but Corbière's toad is an object of repulsion rather than an allegorical victim.

[48] Baudelairian identification with a pariah is a stance also used to parodic effect in 'Bonne fortune et fortune', 'Frère et sœur jumeaux', and 'Idylle coupée'.

[49] René Martineau, *Tristan Corbière*, 74. [50] *Le Temps jaune*, 6.

derogative pronoun *ça* refers backwards to the song and also forwards to the woman's cry of recognition, 'Un crapaud!' (7), so the toad's grammatical entrance into the poem, 'c'est là', is as furtive as his lurking in the shadows. The woman's exclamation comes at what would have been the volta position, as if her cry is responsible for turning the whole sonnet upside down. The poem breaks down into a staccato dialogue, in which many of the words are loaded with an intonational force as strong as that of 'Ça' and 'là'.

Having named the toad, the woman mechanically repeats the interjection '— Horreur! —' (10–11) to express her repulsion at the toad's song. The man, who is closer to the narrator, more guardedly refers to the toad with the oxymoronic metaphors 'poète tondu, sans aile' (9) and 'rossignol de la boue' (10). The irony cuts two ways, as these formulae use conventional aesthetic criteria to deride the toad for his degraded state, yet by referring to this earthbound creature as a poet they undercut the cliché of the poet soaring and singing. The lack of communication between the two characters reflects the internal division of the poet, and his difficulty in meeting his audience, just as the framing poems 'Le Poète et la cigale' and 'Ça?' present *Les Amours jaunes* from two perspectives to suggest the gap between the poet and his readers.

The last line, 'Bonsoir — ce crapaud-là c'est moi', is isolated on the page and strangely detached from the rest of the scene. Although it reads like a confident statement of identity, it is not clear who is speaking, or to whom. The utterance is simultaneously a greeting and a farewell, addressed to both the woman in the poem and the reader of the poem. Indeed, the voices of the narrator, the two lovers, and the toad are superimposed on each other. The word 'crapaud' is tainted with the woman's disgust, the deictic 'là' embodies the narrator's distance, the identification implied by 'c'est moi' takes up the man's sympathy, and the line quite literally enacts the earlier description of the toad's song as an echo. The toad is finally given a voice, but it only recycles other voices from the preceding text. Like the parrots in 'Paris' II, the poet-toad is only able to copy others and has difficulty producing anything new. As in 'Paris', the separate voices which had offered conflicting perspectives on the toad are all collapsed onto each other at the end. The effect of an uncanny voice from beyond is produced by the merging of different voices and perspectives, rather than from a cosmic setting, although the echo-like quality of the song, and the sinister juxtaposition of 'tout vif' and 'enterré' hints at a state between life and death. 'Le Crapaud' blurs the rhetorical situation partly through ellipsis and partly through dialogue.

The artist is not merely represented as being uncertain, but uncertainty about the artist is folded into the language. Both 'Le Crapaud' and 'La Pipe au poète' suggest the artist's uncertainty about his worth by showing how difficult it is to evaluate him. Diverse voices are enlisted to mock the poet, so the poems constitute what Philippe Hamon describes as a ' "montage" des sources et des sphères d'évaluation'.[51] These poems use complex rhetorical situations to suggest the inner division of the artist from an external viewpoint, rather than using introspection. None of the speakers within the poem understands the poet as a whole, but the reader provides the external perspective necessary to build an overall picture of a self-divided subject.

The artist persona is a heightened case of the unsettling subject characteristic of *Les Amours jaunes*. The customary hesitations are compounded by additional uncertainties over whether the poet is charlatan or hero, incompetent failure or misunderstood genius. By openly posing, the artist simultaneously accepts the essential unreality of art and attacks it as clichéd artifice. Rather than retreating behind an enigmatic fixed surface, like the impassive painted features of Mallarmé's 'pitre' or Laforgue's Pierrots, he exposes the workings of the pose from a variety of perspectives. When used with ironic distance, the pose becomes a means of exploring the contradictions inherent in the condition of the late nineteenth-century poet. Corbière expresses greater doubt about the poet's value than Baudelaire had done. The reversals and multiple perspectives make it difficult to tell whether the poets ironically figured are successful or incompetent, realistic or Romantic. Corbière reworks familiar nineteenth-century themes, notably the poet as exile, the poet as prostitute, and the conflict between bohemians and bourgeois. With realistic lucidity he mocks art which claims to offer a spiritual refuge from the generalized prostitution of the age, yet by refusing to parade his inner self directly or perform to the masses, he also refuses to participate in this prostitution. The paradoxical language plays out the contradictory position of the poet who resists the prevailing ideology, but is too lucid to seek refuge in an illusory ideal. It is difficult to identify the view of the poet located by implication between the parodied extremes of real and ideal. He does not transform reality into a myth or transcend it with beauty, but makes contradiction his essence, and indirectly conveys the underlying workings of the new urban society. In analysing the reasons why artists themselves had difficulty distinguishing between the

[51] *L'Ironie littéraire*, 33.

incompetent failure and the misunderstood genius, Bourdieu alludes to the 'extraordinaire incertitude' they experienced as a result.[52] It is the particularity of this sensation of 'incertitude' that Corbière's verse evokes with great precision. His anti-intellectual poetry conveys the *sensation* of uncertainty which plagues the artist, and uses irony to suggest contradictory values. As Michael Hamburger suggests, he can tell us more than any other poet of his time about what it was that made the need for masks so imperative at the end of the Romantic period.[53] The realistic technique of multiple perspectives is defamiliarizing in the lyric poem, but Corbière uses all these strategies to ironize the poet from within poetry in such a way that irony becomes eminently poetic.

[52] There is a fine line between 'l'artiste raté, bohème qui prolonge la révolte adolescente au-delà de la limite socialement assignée' and '"l'artiste maudit", victime provisoire de la réaction suscitée par la révolution symbolique qu'il opère' (*Les Règles de l'art*, 111).

[53] Michael Hamburger, *The Truth of Poetry: Tensions in Modern Poetry from Baudelaire to the 1960s* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1969; repr. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972), 55.

4

'Thought-Feeling': The Language of Sensation

Corbière's is a poetry of sensations rather than ideas, and although uncertainty is the predominant sensation in *Les Amours jaunes*, many poems nonetheless project a strong sense of a consciousness confronting highly concrete phenomena, whether the body itself or the physical environment. These sensations frequently represent emotions and ideas indirectly, as Eliot recognizes when he describes Corbière's poetry as a 'product of thought-feeling and feeling-thought'.[1] This is the hallmark of metaphysical poetry for Eliot, who argues that where poetry in general merely fixes emotions, metaphysical poetry fuses ideas into emotions. Corbière's ironic language constantly explores the interplay between thought and feeling, and his distinctive orality plays an instrumental role in this process. His dialogue sometimes conveys the raw immediacy of emotion, but he also frequently plays on the intonational ambiguity of print to suggest detachment. Double-voiced utterances and wordplay are devices used variously to protect against the rawness of emotions, to scrutinize and dissect them, and to convey their complexity.

Instead of reaching for the customary abstractions to name thoughts and feelings, Corbière uses sensory data to evoke experiences which cannot so easily be labelled. Variations on this technique are widespread in this period, as many writers were experimenting with ways of expressing sense perception, following the initiative of Baudelaire and Flaubert, who, as Fredric Jameson observes, introduced physical sensations into literature.[2] Writing in this period is often marked by what Christopher Prendergast describes as a 'disarticulation of narrative coherence into a

[1] *Varieties of Metaphysical Poetry*, 217.

[2] Fredric Jameson, 'Baudelaire as Modernist and Postmodernist', in *Lyric Poetry: Beyond New Criticism*, ed. Chaviva Hošek and Patricia Parker (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985), 247–63 (253).

flux of pure "sensations" '.[3] By foregrounding sensation, such writing diminishes the importance of plot and increases the importance of the perceiving subject. This aesthetic is taken to an extreme by Verlaine, who juxtaposes sense impressions to convey a state of mind without recounting the story which gave rise to it, and even obscures the physical cause of sensations. Jean-Pierre Richard ascribes what he calls the 'fadeur' of Verlaine's sensations to the fact that they do not refer back to any concrete origin (sensation being defined as 'la messagère d'un univers lointain, le signe physique d'un object émetteur'),[4] and notes that a world in which causes are so uncertain is one which rapidly loses meaning for the subject.[5] Corbière's depiction of sensation, like Verlaine's, is closely linked to a sense of meaninglessness and to an avoidance of narrative. However, Corbière conveys a stronger sense of a tangible external world than Verlaine. The combination of impressionism and vivid precision which made Corbière's Brittany so palpable is also applied to the elusive inner life of his subjects, and he depicts emotions and perceptions using concrete and highly specific imagery rather than vague abstractions.

Using vivid images to represent the inner life is one way of exteriorizing the self, and Corbière often reminds us how startling the contents of the mind can be. However, the impact of this material stems to a large extent from the innovative way in which form is used to convey the movements of consciousness. Writers of both novels and poetry at this time were simultaneously engaged in developing a language for elusive and transient sense experience, but Corbière's particularity was to handle the material with irony. Formal features, such as indirect expression, surprising juxtapositions, and non-linear narrative, record the instability of sensations whilst also functioning as markers of irony. Irony sometimes involves the intellect undermining sensibility, but irony is not merely intellectual; Linda Hutcheon points out that it has an emotive or affective dimension because it involves the attribution of an evaluative edge.[6] Even when exercised as a means of lucidly analysing emotions, it can be a way of protecting feelings and indeed of emphasizing their significance. Irony also opens up other kinds of gap between thoughts and feelings. As Eliot points out, Corbière translates ideas into sensible form, by using objects to carry general thoughts, but

[3] Christopher Prendergast, *Paris and the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1992), 160.

[4] Jean-Pierre Richard, *Poésie et profondeur*, Points (Paris: Seuil, 1955), 166.

[5] Ibid. 178–9.

[6] *Irony's Edge*, 37.

often insinuates discrepancies between the idea and image, as we saw in the case of the pustules shaped like fleur-de-lis in 'La Rapsode foraine'. Such formulations highlight the distance between the linguistic play and the perceived objects, and thereby contribute to a sense of the subject's alienation from the world. Elsewhere, the ambiguity of irony enhances the realistic depiction of the subject's inner life, by conveying sensations of uncertainty and capturing the convolutions of consciousness. Ironic juxtapositions help to capture the illogical flux of a subject's perceptions, feelings, and thoughts, and, since irony is not a static trope but a process of reversal, it conveys the mobility of mental events.

Corbière's irony contributes to the strong sense of a particular personality projected by his verse. This is partly because, as Houston observes, unusual patterns of imagery convey the special and private quality of a character's thoughts and feelings.[7] Because general language is approximate, paradoxically the most ordinary form of expression does not always give the impression of a real person speaking.[8] Corbière's ironic discourse is far removed from ordinary speech, and his unusual style helps to suggest the distinct consciousness of his characters. The sense of a lively persona is heightened by the use of structures akin to the dramatic monologue. Eliot points out that Corbière, like Donne and Laforgue, produced monologues 'in which the pattern is given by what goes on within the mind, rather than by the exterior events which provoke the mental activity and play of thought and feeling'.[9] Wayne Booth, for whom irony is a device requiring the reader to reconstruct hidden meanings, identifies dramatic monologues as works in which 'the reconstruction of messages or content seems to be for the sake of revising and completing a picture of the speaker' rather than completing a proposition.[10] Corbière's speakers are frequently not conscious of making an argument to a reader or audience, and he is not inviting us to interpret the convictions of any given character as a message in themselves, but using each character's views and values to convey vividly a personality in a dramatic situation. The section of 'La Rapsode foraine' which describes the religious festival verges on being a stream of consciousness, for the scene is depicted by means of the sceptical onlooker's responses. The sense of complexity in such texts arises partly as a result of the distance between speaker and writer, and Eric Griffiths

[7] *French Symbolism and the Modernist Movement*, 59. [8] Ibid. 18–19.

[9] T. S. Eliot, 'Donne in our time', in *A Garland for John Donne*, ed. Theodore Spencer (Gloucester, MA: Smith, 1958), 1–19 (16).

[10] *A Rhetoric of Irony*, 137.

argues that in monologues it is the fictional separation of writer from speaker of the poem which conducts the thinking of the poem.[11]

The poems, then, convey far more thought than the speakers themselves. We have already seen how poems variously expose speakers as artificial constructs and fragment subjects into a plurality of voices. These are ways of evoking the particularity of a complex divided personality, but they can also be used to transcend the individual. At one level, ironic double-voicing is a way of insinuating alien points of view into a stream of consciousness. At another, the destabilizing and indirect movement of irony can be seen as a model for the processes of perceiving, feeling, and thinking. The vacillation which is so characteristic of *Les Amours jaunes* is a physical sensation, a mental operation, and an ironic device. The book sometimes seems to be a self-negating game, but despite the endless contradictions it has great emotional intensity. It may be tempting to refer the vacillation to critical notions of impersonality, and read it as a sign of the subject's disappearance, but vacillation needs to be understood as a process in itself.

LOVE POEMS: INTERSUBJECTIVE ENCOUNTERS

Corbiere's lovers are acutely aware of the absurdity of their impulses and gestures, and, in the same way that his verse makes artists into clowns, so it undercuts the conventional lyric pose of the lover. The main focus of the love poems is the painful immediacy of unsatisfactory experience, which is conveyed partly by inverting the usual conventions of the genre, but above all by the linguistic fragmentation. Descriptions of amorous experience involve uncomfortable sensations, and bodies are problematic. Laforgue notes, 'il ne montre jamais la chair — miracle il n'y a pas un sein, une gorge — une (p. 36) — dans ses vers'.[12] Although there are more glimpses of flesh than Laforgue suggests, these are far from sensual. Corbière reduces love to a series of fleeting encounters, often with prostitutes, most of which are anticlimaxes of one kind or another. Sometimes the letdown is expressed via an anecdote, as in 'Bonne fortune et fortune', which parodies Baudelaire's 'À une passante' by staging a chance encounter between strangers which ends not with a spiritual connection but with a comic twist: the woman gives the poet money. The 'Sérénade des Sérénades' section plays on the stereotypes

[11] *The Printed Voice of Victorian Poetry*, 214.

[12] 'Une étude sur Corbière', 4.

of courtship to render thwarted love parodically. The poet receives no response and his performance is forced inwards to create an oxymoronic texture which plays out the self-torture of an unrequited lover. The climax of the sequence, 'Grand Opéra', ironizes the religious metaphors traditionally used to celebrate woman's spirituality and inaccessibility. The lover serenades a statue of a saint, the ultimate version of a woman on a pedestal, only to reveal his baser instincts, and to mock these profane desires. However, showing that the man's pursuit is base is another way of saying that he is not worthy of the woman on the pedestal, so there is nostalgia for the idealized position of woman.

Corbière not only mocks male lovers, but also tackles female stereotypes. 'À l'Éternel Madame' is a series of attempts to grasp the elusive nature of woman; the first two lines alone identify her sucessively as 'Mannequin idéal', 'tête-de-turc du leurre', and 'éternel Féminin'. Corbière's love poems rarely simply offer descriptions of a loved one, nor does he exploit the lyric's potential to perform an act of seduction. Instead they show the distorting processes of perception, and stage failed seductions. Interpersonal relationships are compromised by the dual natures of both parties: women, accused of fickleness and infidelity, are literally two-faced, whilst the poet-lovers are torn by the kind of obsessive self-awareness described in Chapter 3. The gender opposition is nonetheless undercut by desexualized descriptions of bodies and references to castration. Corbière's irony is well suited for evoking communicative breakdowns, encounters between mismatched subjects, and the impossibility of relationship between the sexes, which was to become a favourite Decadent and Laforguian theme. His love poems are frequently a 'dialogue de sourds' between a woman and a poet who fail to connect, as in 'Le Novice en partance et sentimental', which depicts a relationship from the disparate perspectives of a young sailor and his sweetheart.

Corbière often uses monologue forms to explore the perceptions and mental processes of lovers. His techniques can be seen particularly clearly in poems spoken by women, in which the distance between author and speaker is foregrounded. The eponymous speaker of 'Femme', like the pipe in 'La Pipe au poète', takes over the first person to describe the poet from outside, only to reveal her own shortcomings. She presents herself as confused, and her juxtaposed exclamations verge on a stream of consciousness. She begins with an excoriating analysis of the poet's worth, with invective recalling the monologue of the poet's wife in Baudelaire's 'Bénédiction'. She ridicules herself for desiring him as a

lover and yet explores ways in which she might handle him. Although she presents herself as a predatory woman exploiting an impotent poet (23–4), she readily admits that she is an unreliable commentator and that they are both groping in the dark:

> Je suis myope, il est vrai… Peut-être qu'il est louche;
> Je l'ai vu si peu — mais si mal. — (27–8)

We see the poet through her eyes, but learn relatively little about her except that she is trivial and cruel; this is not so much an attempt to adopt a woman's point of view, as a reflection of the poet's narcissistic obsession with the way he appears in other people's thoughts. In dramatic monologues 'the source of the pattern is distinct from the origin of the speech',[13] and here the poet seems to be patterning the woman's speech to his own ends.

The linked sonnets 'Pauvre garçon' and 'Déclin' are also spoken by a woman. They juxtapose conversational fragments, a technique already seen in 'Cap'taine Ledoux', but here transposed to a more cosmopolitan setting. The sonnets only show one side of the conversation, which puts a spotlight on the woman's thoughts. She is gossiping about a poet, and the title, 'Pauvre garçon', sounds like an exclamation summing up her pitying attitude to him. In the first two stanzas she reminisces about how she used to manipulate this poet, a ridiculous figure unaware of his own feelings, and reveals herself to be cruelly oblivious of the hurt she may have caused. The conversational texture is ordered by the sonnet, for her crucial question 'Est-il mort?' falls just after the volta. It is as though her companion has just broken the news of the poet's death and we hear only her reaction to the revelation. Although the news sparks little remorse, and gives rise to speculation about the cause of his premature end, the tercets are darker, and through conjecture she comes to express self-doubt and to admit that she may have been responsible. The next poem, 'Déclin', presents the poet in his successful middle age, and shows the woman praising his youthful exuberance, only to lament that he is now boring and successful. If this poem is exploring an alternative outcome, and the career is the future the 'Pauvre garçon' would have had if he had lived, then maturity is just as much a dead-end as premature demise. The incompatibility of this couple continues in a third sonnet, 'Bonsoir', uttered in a voice close to the poet without being in the first person, who replies to the woman in the preceding

[13] Griffiths, *The Printed Voice of Victorian Poetry*, 214.

poems, and opens with an insult aimed directly at her: 'Et vous viendrez alors, imbécile caillette'. The salutation 'bonsoir' could be a welcome or a farewell, but here it has the force of a rejection and a departure; the poet is simultaneously rejecting her belated advances and looking towards death. Although she spurned him when he was unknown, she is seeking him out now that he is renowned. In 'Déclin' the woman rejects the poet as no longer being exciting now that he is famous, but in 'Bonsoir' he rejects her for being too late, now he has lost interest in poetry and love.

The sonnet sequence began by smuggling the drama of mortality into the woman's ephemeral gossip, and then considered the poet's story from a variety of perspectives. These conversational fragments have a novelistic quality, but the story in which they belong is only hinted at. The shortness of the poems and lack of context make it difficult to pin down the protagonists. Booth explains that ironic self-portraits are rare in short poems, since length and variety are needed to 'provide corrective crosslights: contrasts of words with deeds, or words spoken early and words spoken later, or words spoken in soliloquy and words spoken to other characters, or points of view'.[14] One of the reasons why Corbière's poetry is so difficult to read is that these contrasts often operate within individual words; double-voiced words are spoken simultaneously earlier and later. He plays not only on double meanings, but also on the double contexts of words, and thus condenses multiple perspectives into short texts. These particular poems are not quite part of the same story, for the man's version is told in the future tense (resigned, already knowing) and the woman's is in the past tense and looking back. It is as if the story is told from disparate points in time, and utterances from crucial turning points are telescoped into short poems. They could represent the poet's envisaging hypothetical futures, as in 'Paris', pondering whether to die romantically young or live to be prosaically old, and imagining the woman's failure to respond in each event, in which case the third poem expresses certainty that it will end badly. The interest between man and woman here fails to coincide in time, and the separation of male and female points of view into different poems underlines the failure of communication between the two sexes.

'Fleur d'art' presents the gulf between male and female points of view in a different way. The man addresses the woman using her language with critical distance. The speaker has been embittered by a love affair,

[14] *A Rhetoric of Irony*, 150–1.

and evokes the destructiveness of his mistress by ironically describing her taste in the artistic trimmings of love, such that the meanings are all double-edged:

> Un cœur gravé dans ta manière noire,
> Des traits de canif à coups de stylet. —
>
> Tout fier mon cœur porte à la boutonnière
> Que tu lui taillas, un petit bouquet (3–6)

'Manière noire' is a technical term for a sort of engraving, but metaphorically it suggests ominous personality traits. 'Stylet' means both an instrument used for engraving and a weapon, so the 'cœur gravé' is both a decorative carving and a gravely wounded organ. 'Boutonnière' is a button-hole, a surgical term for an incision, and slang for a scar, so the pain is caused by the innocent gift of a flower but is also a visceral wound. The duplicity of the woman's nature is made explicit in the order 'Double femme, va!' (12), but Corbière constantly reveals malevolence in her attention to superficial sophistication, which he exposes as sentimental clutter. We are given a picture of a woman who is discriminating in the realm of these trivial details, but who hurts her lover. He borrows her discourse of refinement, but uses it so as to expose her cruelty. He uses the woman's language not to understand her, but to emphasize how alien her priorities are. Women do not challenge the boundaries of their suitors' personalities but tend to reinforce their hesitancy and suspicion, and there is rarely any real dialogue between lovers.

THE CONVOLUTIONS OF CONSCIOUSNESS

The poems discussed above emphasize the limitations of the subjects grappling with each other, but the monologue mode can also convey the complex mental processes of such subjects. The confused male lover in 'À une camarade' uses an exclamatory style which renders experience as unmediated sensation, as if the emotion can hardly be contained by ordinary grammar. The lack of syntactic subordination and refusal of logical movement produce a texture akin to the stream of consciousness. Pound describes Corbière's words as 'wrenched and knocked out of him by fatality, by the violence of his feeling'.[15] In 'À une camarade', the speaker plays out the precarious power game between himself and the

[15] *Make it New: Essays by Ezra Pound*, 182.

woman in his own mind, in a kind of internal dialogue. As I pointed out in Chapter 1, the blurring of male and female voices forces the reader to work at disentangling them. It is not clear if the speaker is citing or imagining the *camarade*'s utterances, so it is difficult to establish what has really happened between them, but we get a vivid impression of the man's confused thoughts.

In the first quatrain, the movements of his mind are not spelled out, but only suggested by the juxtaposition of fragmented explanations:

> Que me veux-tu donc, femme trois fois fille?…
> Moi qui te croyais un si bon enfant!
> — De l'amour?… — Allons : cherche, apporte, pille!
> M'aimer aussi, toi!… moi qui t'aimais tant. (1–4)

The speaker begins with an insulting rebuff to a woman who appears to have made an advance towards him, only to reveal in the second line that until then he had thought of her rather affectionately as a harmless companion. However, the fear is not so much of her as of himself—the emphasis on 'Moi' in line 2 suggests he is incredulous that she should want anything from him. He is deriding himself for having been deceived by her and simultaneously reproaching her for shattering his illusions about her. His incredulity is reiterated in line 3 by his disdainful echo of her invitation to declare his love: 'De l'amour?…', revealing that love is his worst fear. He reacts against this with an even more violent rebuff, issuing commands to her as if to a dog. He then abruptly changes tack, and starts begging her to reciprocate his love in line 4, which presupposes that he does love her. The missing link between lines 3 and 4 is an admission of his love—he is unable to declare himself directly but does so between the lines. It seems that he initially rejected her advances because he feared declaring his own emotions and running the risk of rejection himself. None of his statements can be taken at face value as they contradict each other, quote the interlocutor, and avoid direct expression of his own true feelings. The succession of commands could be an ironic quotation of the orders given to him by the 'camarade', to attack her authoritarian manner of making demands on his affections. On the other hand, he could be giving ironic orders to her, as a way of asserting control, suggesting that he would have preferred to make the first move. The command 'M'aimer aussi, toi!…' has the same abrupt tone as the preceding orders, but its sense is already more tender, and this affection then finally softens the tone with 'moi qui t'aimais tant'. Although the past tense of 'aimais' suggests that he

had loved her before she had given any sign of reciprocating, the past tense of 'croyais' in line 2 has already suggested that his feelings have now altered. The voice of this ironic lover runs into conflicts with itself and goes round in circles. Oxymoron is a dynamic process, constantly giving and retracting, rather than a formulaic opposition between static poles such as ideal and reality. Irony is a way of lucidly analysing the sensation of being in love, and expressing ambivalent feelings, but its sinuous twists get him into deeper complexities. The reflective process itself distorts the spontaneous feelings.

The second quatrain evokes the warmth of the unrequited love, which retrospectively seems blissful, and the speaker's discomfort at the prospect of a reciprocal relationship:

> Oh! je t'aimais comme… un lézard qui pèle
> Aime le rayon qui cuit son sommeil…
> L'Amour entre nous vient battre de l'aile :
> — Eh! qu'il s'ôte de devant mon soleil! (5–8)

The speaker, torn between two contradictory desires, hesitates between an invitation and a warning. Love is an unwanted intrusion which comes even though he is resisting it. As an elemental sensation, it is a pleasure akin to basking in the sun, but when it takes the conventional form of a winged Cupid, it becomes troublesome. 'Battre de l'aile' means 'falter' or 'pass out', so the wordplay leaves a picture of a cherub crashing in between the two non-lovers. This intruder blocks out the sun, so Corbière's two images for love are competing with each other, opening up a gap between sensual experience and mythical abstractions. The imperative of line 8 alludes to a legendary exchange between the cynic Diogenes and Alexander the Great, in which the philosopher asked the ruler to move, because he was blocking the sunlight. By incorporating this allusion, Corbière equates 'Amour' with great power and yet simultaneously derides it, underlining its ambivalence and suggesting that personification cannot adequately capture the complexity of the phenomenon. We have already seen how the poem 'Ça?' manifests a suspicion of prefabricated labels applied to art, and here the terms 'Amour' and 'aimer' come under fire, culminating in the paradox 'Mon amour, à moi, n'aime pas qu'on l'aime' (l9). Corbière describes the sensations associated with love from first principles rather than referring instantly to received knowledge.

The fourth stanza defines love by engaging ironically with conventional paraphernalia:

Curiosité, bibelot, bricole ?…
C'est possible: il est rare — et c'est son bien —
Mais un bibelot cassé se recolle;
Et lui, décollé, ne vaudra plus rien!… (13–16)

The 'bibelot' is an analogy for love as a ready-made thing, and the quatrain rejects love as part of the bric-a-brac of cultural heritage. The last two lines illustrate the difference between love as a trinket which can always be reassembled, and the fragile speaker, who fears he will be destroyed by an unhappy love affair. 'Se recoller' literally means to be stuck back together but also figuratively to get back together after an argument. Corbière is not only using objects from the outside world to represent the subject's inner life, but referring ironically to worldly trivia in order to denigrate the woman's view of love. The speaker's own aspiration towards something deeper is expressed negatively by mocking her superficiality. Exterior objects hint at the social context and the surface clutter of Second Empire style. Although this poem is less urbane than monologues by Laforgue or Eliot, being more concerned with the elemental connection between two people than with the constraints of the social order, it still hints at a worldly setting. By incorporating small fragments of social discourse and glimpses of objects, Corbière incorporates an 'effet de réel' into his resolutely anti-mimetic language. Including specific objects also makes for a realistic representation of subjectivity, because the more particular he makes the content of consciousness, the more credible is the personality. The connections between subject and object also have poetic force, as Baudelaire recognizes when he says that combining 'le monde extérieur à l'artiste et l'artiste lui-même' produces a 'magie suggestive'.[16]

The fourth stanza resists the addressee's love by arguing that it would be more original to maintain a platonic relationship:

Va, n'enfonçons pas la porte entr'ouverte
Sur un paradis déjà trop rendu! (17–18)

'Enfoncer une porte ouverte' is to labour an obvious point, and here the expression is made into a literal door, behind which lies a garden. This paradise is 'déjà trop rendu', as the speaker is only too aware that it is a well-worn topos of love. He is unable to throw himself into unmediated experience but suffers from a Flaubertian horror of cliché, and by going to great lengths to avoid declaring his love he creates further problems for

[16] *Œuvres complètes*, ii. 598.

himself. This poem does not record a discovery of a primal experience of love, but represents the psychological confusion experienced by a subject reflecting on stereotypical roles and resisting spontaneous action. Excess consciousness inhibits action, just as for Hamlet. The novelty of the Corbière poem lies in the expression of psychological hesitation and the difficulty of reconciling what is known with that is felt, which Eliot identifies as the modern mode of metaphysical poetry.[17] Eliot argues that such poetry shows how philosophy exerts its influence on the minute particulars of a poet's daily life, his quotidian mind, and especially on his way of love-making.[18] Here the philosophy of doubt affects the way the speaker deals with his feelings. The sentimentality of love is ironized, yet irony is also used to suggest the real complexity of the situation.

The resistance to cliché continues with the suggestion that they label their attachment a friendship:

> Appelons cela : *l'amitié calmée*;
> Puisque l'amour veut mettre son holà
> N'y croyons pas trop, chère mal-aimée…
> C'est toujours trop vrai ces mensonges-là! — (29–32)

Reflecting on the terminology of affection is itself a cliché, found, for example, in Marivaux's plays, and still topical in the nineteenth century.[19] 'L'amitié calmée' sounds comically euphemistic and we cannot tell what it is covering up—changing the words is not sufficient to alter the feelings. The poem enumerates reasons why they should not become closer than friends, suggesting that love cannot be trusted as it is often a lie, although a lie that is paradoxically close to the truth. 'C'est vrai, ce mensonge?' is an ironic conversational way of indicating to someone that you do not believe them, and Corbière turns the interjection into a statement of a universal truth. Double meaning is thematized throughout the poem, in terms such as 'fard', 'attrapé', 'trompais', 'trompé', and 'mensonges'. Despite these charges of treachery, nothing really seems to have taken place, or it is not certain what has happened. The poem concludes by comically reversing the topos of death caused by an unhappy love affair:

[17] *Varieties of Metaphysical Poetry*, 215. [18] Ibid. 294.

[19] A frivolous debate about 'amour' versus 'amitié' took place in the pages of *La Vie parisienne* in the early 1870s, which included a story where one party is in love but the other calls it 'amitié'. Lawrence Watson identifies the theme of the 'femme-camarade' in literary works by Laforgue, Verlaine, and Rimbaud, in '"L'Hiver qui vient": poème-manifeste', in James Hiddleston (ed.), *Laforgue aujourd'hui* (Paris: Corti, 1988), 135–53 (149).

> Si nous en mourons — ce sera de rire…
> Moi qui l'aimais tant ton rire si frais! (35–6)

This plays on the expression 'mourir de rire', but, because of the way the phrase is broken up, we read it in the literal sense of dying. The speaker then underlines the wistfulness inherent in this joke by indulging in memories of his affection before it was complicated by reality, the 'rire si frais' suggests a physical impression of youth and brightness.

'À une camarade' plays on familiar motifs from the discourse of love to articulate a particular psychological state provoked by an affective bond, neither of which can easily be summarized by existing categories. Indeed, it is not clear what emotion is being expressed, but the sensation is of discomfort. It makes a joke of the tendency of Western poetry to focus on unrequited love; the speaker of the poem being surprised to find his poetic pose of unacknowledged admirer disrupted by the woman having announced an interest in him. The poem could be read as parodying a series of literary stances, the awkward lover adopting various poses to hide his feelings. On the other hand, there is a strong sense of two real human beings grappling with each other. As Griffiths says, 'the dramatic monologue stages with minute vitality the risks and slips of communication between its characters, but it does so with a superb reliance on its own ability to run, to manage, such risks and to convey their significance.'[20] The poem as a whole tells the reader more about the situation than the characters trapped within it can see.

Corbière's fragmented texture resembles a stream of consciousness, partly as a result of grammatical irregularities, but also through the indirect discourse of irony which captures the mobility, contradictions, and hesitations of consciousness. Techniques such as cutting out predication and juxtaposing images without specifying their relationship are a way of avoiding direct statement. The paradoxes and puns stem from a fascination with the material content of thought. Irony dramatizes the subject's scrambled logic, and allows him to be both victim and torturer. The psychological realism for which Corbière is often admired results from the way this ironic movement captures what Baudelaire describes as 'soubresauts de la conscience'.[21] This is not yet free verse in which rhythm is psychologically motivated, but Corbière conveys the mental process from within verse by using irony. Irony says more by its circuitous route than a direct statement can convey. These

[20] *The Printed Voice of Victorian Poetry*, 204.
[21] Baudelaire, *Œuvres complètes*, i. 276.

circuitous routes are not necessarily circumlocutions, for Corbière often compresses indirectness into telegraphic formulae; the first stanza of 'À une camarade' is short but the number of ironic reversals conveys much information. Orality gives a sense of immediacy, but oral material is written in such a way as to disrupt the communicative circuit, and writerly strategies build ambiguity into the language.

'LE POÈTE CONTUMACE': SELF-PROTECTIVE IRONIES

Whereas 'À une camarade' showed a speaker going round in circles and lashing out in order to avoid acting on his love, 'Le Poète contumace' presents a poet who has been spurned by his lover and exiles himself to a ruin to mourn his loss.[22] Lyric poets are fond of ruins as they project themes of inwardness and objectify the contrast between past and present,[23] but here the ruin is also a refuge and protective shell. This long poem uses irony both to subvert a familiar Romantic scenario and to protect a vulnerable subject. 'Le Poète contumace' stages a poet-subject who is mocked by the poem, but also actively uses humour as self-protection. The poem falls into two sections, the first an objective journalistic description and the second a monologue by the poet, but the division between them is not clear-cut, as the exterior voice tries to penetrate the poet's shell with language which verges on the *style indirect libre* before giving way to the monologue itself.

The descriptive voice of the first section gives a vivid panoramic description of the ruins where the poet is a tenant, showing first the milieu and then the inhabitant, parodying the description of the dilapidated pension Vauquer which opens *Le Père Goriot*. The voice of the realist is a prime target for Corbière's irony, as he mocks the pompous pretensions of that style.[24] The description of the setting is mildly ironic in its use of exaggerations and repetitions, such as 'ancien vieux couvent' (10). The treatment of the poet is more caustic, featuring familiar

[22] 'Contumace' is a legal term meaning judgment passed in absence of a defendant, but in the context of *Les Amours jaunes* this failure of presence has more existential implications; this is not just a poet who happens to have been condemned, but the poetic vocation is itself a punishment and exile.

[23] As Philippe Hamon points out in *Expositions*, 62.

[24] Philippe Hamon points out that realist texts are serious, and description contrasts with suspense and romance, as it tends to be undertaken by a detached and knowledgeable speaker, *Introduction à l'analyse du descriptif*, 41.

tactics such as the ironic capitalization of 'Poète' (16) and paradoxes like 'Quelque *Parisien* | De Paris ou d'ailleurs' (29–30). The opinions and prejudices of the locals are noted in a pseudo-documentary fashion:

> Les femmes avaient su — sans doute par les buses —
> Qu'il *vivait en concubinage avec des Muses!*… (27–8)

However, the omniscient voice gradually moves closer to the poet, progressively alluding to his inner life:

> Quelquefois, vaguement, il se prenait attendre…
> Attendre quoi… le flot monter — le flot descendre —
> Ou l'Absente… Qui sait? (50–2)

The speaker is trying to access the poet's thought processes, even if only to mock the apparent emptiness of his dreams. 'Qui sait?' underlines the speaker's self-conscious objectivity, as though he is reminding himself that he is a detached narrator who should not speculate about the poet's erotic desires. It is as though the rational voice is trying to mock the poet's musings, but cannot debase him completely, so his dreams are not negated by the parody. By engaging with these qualities, the speaker is trying to understand the poet, and the following stanza moves even closer to describing the poet's inner life:

> — Est-ce qu'il pouvait, Lui!… n'était-il pas poète…
> Immortel comme un autre?… Et dans sa pauvre tête
> Déménagée, encor il sentait que les vers
> Hexamètres faisaient les cent pas de travers. (61–4)

The nobility of the poet is undermined by the physical reality of writing, as in the ironic image of the elevated hexameters mundanely pacing back and forth in his head. The questions sound as though the speaker is trying to vocalize the poet's thought, and ascribe ambitions to him. The translation of direct speech into the imperfect tense is close to *style indirect libre* but we do not know whether to trust the speaker.

Objectivity gradually shades into identification, and the changeover from observer to poet takes place gradually in the course of a pivotal stanza:

> — Manque de savoir-vivre extrême — il survivait —
> Et — manque de savoir-mourir — il écrivait :
> « C'est un être passé de cent Lunes, ma Chère,
> En ton cœur poétique, à l'état légendaire.
> Je rime, donc je vis… ne crains pas, c'est *à blanc*.
> Une coquille d'huître en rupture de banc! — (65–70)

The monologue is framed by an explanation that the poet is hovering between life and death, a lyric theme which is evoked with comic distance rather than cosmic authority (65–6). This joke involves multiple use of the verb *vivre*: 'savoir-vivre' is taken literally by 'survivait', so trivial etiquette is ironically defined as a matter of life and death, which derides social proprieties and emphasizes the poet as social outsider. 'Savoir-vivre' is then tweaked to give 'savoir-mourir', a witticism which reduces dying to a social grace, whilst insinuating that it is still daunting enough to scare the poet off committing suicide, and also recalling that suicide was a voguish act in bohemian circles. The joke is an economical way of expressing multiple meanings, suggesting the poet is both a marginalized figure and an intimate acquaintance of death.

The monologue itself is introduced by 'il écrivait'. The emphasis on the act of writing acknowledges that poetic meanings arise from the ambiguity of the written word. The poet does not assert his first-person presence immediately, but begins his speech obliquely in the third person, by borrowing the melodramatic language of the lover who has rejected him, epitomized by 'cent Lunes' (67). He sees himself as she would see him: as a distant memory. He also exaggerates her preciosity, and shows it to be at odds with her lack of sentiment towards himself. He derides the stereotypical discourse of love, but also derides himself for failing at the game he professes to despise. Again, the speaker's wit is directed against social norms, yet he also uses the standards of society to castigate himself. The humour is directed simultaneously at himself, at her, and at the social and artistic conventions which connect them both, so everything is discredited. It is this mechanism of systematic derision or multidirectional irony which so often evokes the loss of values and sense of a spiritual void.

Even if the poet's words are now given to us in direct speech, his emotion is still evoked indirectly. Indeed, the first person treats feelings just as lightly as the observer had. The poet-subject, who has so far been mocked for aspiring to be a mythic exile, now stages himself in the process of using humour as a tool to tackle an emotional crisis. At the end of the poem he will openly acknowledge this in the aside 'Mon cœur fait de l'esprit — le sot — pour se leurrer…' (166), and show that he is laughing at laughter. Irony is a way of pre-empting the mockery of others. Pauline Newman-Gordon sees Corbière's laughter as a means of exercising lucid control over suffering.[25] These are the kind of jokes Christopher

[25] *Corbière, Laforgue, Apollinaire ou le rire en pleurs.*

Prendergast says are 'at once designed to protect the nervous system from danger, while at the same time symptomatically declaring it to be at the very edge of crisis'.[26] Irony does not just deflate emotion but intensifies it.

This tortured speaker goes on to toy with the very notion of subjecthood with 'Je rime, donc je vis'. The pun on Descartes exposes the artifice of the lyric voice (69–70). The poet interprets his own verse utterance as evidence that he must exist as its origin. He enacts in reverse the process by which readers interpret the lyric as a direct expression of a subject, in order to show that this logic is false, and that the *je lyrique* is a fictional construct. 'C'est *à blanc*' then dismisses both art and life as illusory, and the reference to blanks fired by a gun keeps death on the agenda. This lofty speculation is interrupted by the absurdly concrete oyster shell, a joke explained retrospectively by a pun on 'banc'. 'Rupture de ban' means breaking an order of exile imposed as punishment for a crime, and 'banc de huîtres' is a bed of oysters, so the legal discourse of exile introduced by 'contumace' is folded into an aquatic picture with gastronomic potential. These striking objects, like the 'bibelot' in 'À une camarade', are used to exteriorize the inner life, and the effect of the wordplay is to present the self with comic distance. Corbière's humour is highly poetic, first because it savours the materiality of language, its sound and its appearance on the page, and secondly because it is enigmatic—it both hides and reveals emotion. Jokes, like the oyster shell, both protect the inner self and expose its ruptures. Humour is an indirect way of expressing personal experience, as the poem plays out the scene of a speaker laughing at himself in order to exercise lucid control over his suffering for the benefit of the reader, rather than confiding directly in him or her.

The poet's reflection on death is more playful than that of the pseudo-grave observer, for instance the poet tosses a coin in order to decide whether or not to commit suicide, in a burlesque reworking of Hamlet's indecision. The *style indirect libre* section seemed to attribute loftier ideas to the poet than he has in the first person. The monologue reveals no more than the observer, so the poem shrugs us off at each stage. The outsider seemed to hint that the poet contained hidden depths, but when the poet is given a voice, he can only make jokes about his own emptiness. The very structure of the poem builds up layers of self-protection. The jokes about emptiness have a serious dimension. 'C'est bien moi, je suis là — mais comme une rature' (80) parodically exaggerates the tendency

[26] *Paris and the Nineteenth Century*, 148.

to associate meagre bodily presence with spirituality.[27] 'Rature' also belongs in the paradigm of writing, and suggests the self-aware process of rewriting rather than spontaneous overflow. Furthermore, the full significance of this absence can only be gauged by comparing it to the striking richness of other (mainly uncomfortable) sensations Corbière describes; the impact of the emptiness depends on its contrast with the violent sense of presence elsewhere. It is easy to single out terms like 'rature' as manifestations of the void, but the void is built into the grammar of each phrase, constantly generating ironies and inexplicable sensations. This is a love poem which has a metaphysical scope. The traditional idea of the poet having privileged contact with death is debased since the poet is a shambling ghost, and the major themes of death and art are explored indirectly through humour. As in 'Paria', Corbière apprehends the metaphysical void in an intensely physical way, showing what it feels like rather than presenting it as an idea.

IMPRESSIONISM AND DREAMS: TOWARDS THE VISIONARY

'Le Poète contumace' starts out as a parodic portrait of a Romantic poet and lover and ends up evoking the poet's inner life. Elsewhere, Corbière exploits the subjective quality of speakers' private thoughts to explore heightened states of mind and correspondingly heightened perceptions of reality. 'Steam-boat', instead of merely mocking a Romantic pose, enacts the mental process of idealization (in a far less burlesque fashion than 'Grand Opéra' discussed above) and nostalgia, but undercuts it with an ironic framework. The speaker regrets the loss of a departed lover, and his language at first seems to be that of a sophisticated passenger on a luxury vessel, but the final quatrain reveals him to be a sailor who belongs in the world of the Brittany poems:

> Ainsi déchantait sa fortune,
> En vigie, au sec, dans sa hune,
> Par un soir frais, vers le matin,
> Un pilotin. (41–4)

Like the tourist in 'Veder Napoli poi mori', this speaker is a montage of voices, and the poem plays on the disparity between urban pretension

[27] See Louisa E. Jones, *Sad Clowns and Pale Pierrots: Literature and the Popular Comic Arts in 19th-Century France* (Lexington, KY: French Forum, 1984), 130–1.

and the realities of life at sea.[28] We have already seen how the voice resembles that of a realist speaker paraphrasing sentimental lyricism, and how his irony enhances rather than destroys the feelings. This double-voicing plays out a delicate balance between emotion and reason in dealing with loss, and also creates an atmosphere of unreality.

The first stanza explores the subjective nature of time, this brief encounter felt like an eternity of pleasure, but the speaker now understands that it was a transitory event:

> En fumée elle est donc chassée
> L'éternité, la traversée
> Qui fit de vous ma sœur d'un jour,
> Ma sœur d'amour!… (1–4)

'Éternité' is a word which belongs in two contexts: it was used in the heat of the moment to suggest intensity of feeling, and retrospectively to ironize this misguided euphoria. Even the order of elements is significant: the subjective interpretation, 'éternité', precedes the literal 'traversée', which is then further reduced to the objectively quantifiable 'un jour'. Time is then translated into 'amour', a state of mind which explains the distorted perception of the preceding lines.

The second quatrain shifts from the temporal to the spatial distance of this encounter:

> Là-bas : cette mer incolore
> Où ce qui fut Toi flotte encore…
> Ici : la terre, ton écueil,
> Tertre de deuil! (5–8)

Since the speaker encountered the woman at sea, she is now inextricably linked with it in his mind, and the association is literalized by the description of her remains floating on the sea. Subsequent quatrains explain that in going ashore to her legitimate lover she was lost to the speaker, but he represents his subjective loss as objective fact; he describes the land where she has gone as if she were literally buried there. The woman is forever bound up with the marine setting, which only emphasizes the transience of the encounter. She is quite literally salty from the sea spray: 'Tes sourcils salés de poudrain | Pendant un grain!' (19–20). Corbière rarely shows lovers really engaging with each other, but here the union is facilitated by environmental conditions, as the storm mingles air and water. The number of terms used to define

[28] A similar technique is used in 'À mon cotre Le Négrier'.

the woman: 'sœur', 'Passagère', 'ma Peureuse', 'effrontée', and 'Petite', suggest she is difficult to pin down, but also makes her contingent on the particular circumstances. She is redefined anew in the context of each line, being for instance the 'Peureuse' during the storm, and 'Petite' when she is contrasted with the breadth of the horizon which he is contemplating. He refers to the woman as 'une Passagère', which literally indicates that she was a passenger, but also figuratively suggests that she was only a temporary fixture in his life. These factors all combine to emphasize the fleeting quality of their intimacy.

The scene is evoked impressionistically by a succession of sensations rather than conventional description and emotions: the rocking motion, the taste of salt, the whipping hair, a glimpse of the horizon. Perceptions of the woman are blended with notations of the experience of being at sea, whose specificity suggests a vividly remembered and very real encounter. However, since each caress reads like an organic extension of the sailor's everyday contact with the elements, it is possible that she is a figment of his imagination.[29] Corbière rarely evokes communion with a woman in such an evocative way, and it is notable that the most tender moments in *Les Amours jaunes* are illusory. Where Baudelaire's 'La Chevelure' has a woman's hair inspire an imaginary sea voyage, here the sea conjures up an erotic fantasy. Is the sailor inflating a real episode into a grand passion, or is he daydreaming in his solitude? The ironic use of quotation ('ménelas' alludes to Greek mythology, the description of a seagull skimming the waves parodies a Romantic topos) suggests he is drawing on fictions and aspiring to mythical roles yet lucidly aware that they are hollow. Retrospectively, we realize that the memories are inextricably bound up with the present reality of the sailor's night watch (lines 23–4 refer to the woman's boredom during his 'longs quarts de nuit'). The ninth stanza's reference to sleep reinforces the suspicions that the encounter is all a dream, but the vision is all the more alluring for being insubstantial. The speaker here is not made a figure of fun, but the poem suggests that his experience of intimacy, whether imagined or real, is a mere detail in the grand scheme of things. The individual is caught in a pattern far greater than himself and the poem conveys not only the complexity of his mental processes, but also a complex world-view—the self is at the mercy of both the physical elements and his own emotions, and the borderline between dream and reality is a fine one. Unlike other poems, this one does not mimic dialogue or oral exclamations, but is a

[29] Elsewhere women are seen in cloud formations, see 'La Pipe au poète', 'Bonsoir'.

lyrical image of mental events, underlining that dramatic monologue is characterized by 'the imagination and not the illusion of speech'.[30]

If 'Steam-boat' shows a speaker caught up in a daydream, the sonnet 'Duel aux camélias' plunges its subject into a nightmare. He finds himself in an archetypal love triangle and duelling over a woman. The impressionistic use of language evokes the hesitations of a particular mind, but his personality is dissolved into a stream of sensations, and external events are merged with mental description. The speaker's perspective shifts in the course of the incident, and it only emerges gradually that he is one of the protagonists in the scene he describes. He begins in a self-consciously artificial style, which is then disrupted by events themselves, as he realizes that he is trapped in the fight rather than merely embroidering a description of it. Whilst flaunting his artistic control he had lost control of reality, but when reality strikes home he abandons the ostentatious virtuoso style and emits a series of fragmented exclamations. However, despite their apparent disorder these are still highly patterned at a metaphorical level, so the writer's art becomes more apparent only after the speaker's collapse. The poem as a whole is structured by the classical parallel of love and battle; its floral imagery and duel ritual coincide in the key term 'fleuret', meaning both flower and foil. The title alludes to the Dumas novel *La Dame aux camélias*; and the 'dame' who caused the duel hovers behind the poem as a ghostly presence.

The quatrains are the account of an observer not involved in the scene, the past tenses implying a retrospective stance:

> J'ai vu le soleil dur contre les touffes
> Ferrailler. — J'ai vu deux fers soleiller. (1–2)

The speaker observing the preliminaries of the duel does not describe what he knows is there, but what he sees is there. Serge Meitinger likens this technique to that of 'une caméra déréglée qui ne cadrerait que des détails, métonymiques ou parfois métaphoriques de la narration' and emphasizes how this fragmented reporting of perceptions is a way of conveying strong sensations: 'Cette évocation exclut le narrateur en tant que sujet centralisateur du récit, et se laisse aller au primesaut de la sensation la plus forte'.[31] However, the narration does not just dissolve the speaker into a flux of sense experience, but the derangement enacts the mental process by which the speaker finds words for what he is

[30] *The Printed Voice of Victorian Poetry*, 202.
[31] 'L'Ironie antiromantique de Tristan Corbière', 54–5.

seeing, and translates sense experience into metaphors. He describes the participants in the duel as camellias:

> Un monsieur en linge arrangeait sa manche;
> Blanc, il me semblait un gros camélia;
> Une autre fleur rose était sur la branche,
> Rose comme… Et puis un fleuret plia. (5–8)

Although the poem's title was a knowing intertextual reference, the speaker is now playing with the camellia image as if he has just thought of it himself. He presents phenomena in the order in which they are perceived, observing first the colour of the duellist's clothes and then the flower, so we see him in the process of constructing the camellia simile. The poem began with the confident statement 'J'ai vu', but by line 6 he more hesitantly says 'il me semblait', underlining that his perception is subjective. Having established the floral scheme of his dreamscape, he remains at the metaphorical level by introducing 'une autre fleur rose'. If this is another camellia, it could represent the second duellist. On the other hand, it could represent the girl who has caused the duel. The incompleteness of the simile 'Rose comme' gives the impression that the speaker is casting around for a suitably refined analogy, emphasizing her dreamy delicacy, and the likelihood that this is a veiled sexual allusion introduces a note of humour. The suspension points force the reader to linger on 'comme', and the pause enacts the poet's struggle to find an appropriate image. His reverie is interrupted by the foil's sudden movement, marked by 'et', at which point reality intrudes. As in 'Veder Napoli poi mori', the creative process is interrupted by the very events the poet is struggling to immortalize. Indeed, the single action of the poem is condensed into the minimal sidelong phrase 'et puis un fleuret plia', which takes the speaker by surprise. 'Fleuret', with its double meaning of flower and foil, is at once benign and highly violent. It motivates the whole poem, and is situated just before the volta, which marks a crucial moment in the action, as it is at the volta that the speaker realizes that he is himself a camellia-duellist.

The tercets chart the aftermath of the blow and the recognition of its significance, and the narration shifts into the present tense and disintegrates into a series of exclamations, establishing the raw immediacy of the speaking voice:

> — Je vois rouge… Ah oui! c'est juste : on s'égorge —
> … Un camélia blanc — là — comme Sa gorge…
> Un camélia jaune, — ici — tout mâché… (9–11)

The deictics 'là' and 'ici' point to nothing that the reader can see, and their referents are only available to the speaker in the poem, as if he is struggling to locate himself in time and space. 'Je vois rouge' literally refers to the speaker's anger, but the fragmented syntax draws attention to the literal meaning of the idiom 'voir rouge'. It is as though the scene is breaking down into its visual basics, like Rimbaud's 'Nocturne vulgaire' in which 'Un vert et un bleu très foncés envahissent l'image.'[32] Corbière's speaker describes the colour he sees before interpreting it as a sign of bloodshed. There is comedy in the juxtaposition of fragments of polite conversation, such as 'c'est juste', with the violence of 's'égorge', heightened by the alliteration of [j]. At this point the full emotional significance of events finally sinks in, and the camellia metaphor, originally representing the opponent, now brings back memories of the woman who has caused the duel, '… Un camélia blanc — là — comme Sa gorge…'. An indefinite pronoun would normally suggest he is seeing the white flower for the first time, but here he is seeing it with new eyes as an image of the woman. This activates other connotations: the 'Dame aux camélias' was a courtesan, and in the wake of the novel camellias became synonymous with the kept woman. The name of the Dumas heroine derived from her practice of wearing a red or a white camellia to signal to potential customers whether or not she was menstruating. The white flower here indicates an idealized vision of the woman rather than her physical reality. Furthermore, the whiteness of a woman's breasts is traditionally part of poetic praise of her beauty, and it is convention to liken a woman's shoulder or complexion to a camellia. The purity of this elusive woman is contrasted with the redness and violence associated with the speaker, as underlined by the rhyme of 's'égorge' and 'Sa gorge'. This places violence before pleasure, implying an underlying pessimism about the course of love. The speaker then observes for the first time a crushed yellow camellia; the defeated duellist is represented by a flower whose colour recalls the title of the book, with all its negative associations. Where line 10 juxtaposed the white-clad duellist and the white-breasted woman as if in a happily coordinated embrace, in line 11 the humiliated third party is trampled underfoot.

The final tercet explicitly identifies the rejected yellow flower with the speaker, retrospectively clarifying that he was not the pink flower in the second tercet. To heighten the pathos of his failure, the yellow camellia

[32] Rimbaud, *Œuvres*, ed. Suzanne Bernard (Paris: Garnier, 1960), 286.

is now viewed as a real flower which has fallen from his buttonhole. Instead of a hallucinatory image, it is merely a disposable sartorial item:

> Amour mort, tombé de ma boutonnière.
> — À moi, plaie ouverte et fleur printanière!
> Camélia vivant, de sang panaché! (12–14)

However, the apposition 'Amour mort' dissolves the yellow flower into yet another metaphor, this time for the abstract notion of love itself. Flowers in poetry are traditionally associated with transience and therefore death as well as women and love. The 'plaie ouverte et fleur printanière' literally spells out the double meaning of 'boutonnière' as both a wound and a floral ornament; spring's connotations of freshness make the injury seem all the more cruel. 'Boutonnière' is an opening which complements the shaft of the 'fleuret', implying that the speaker is emasculated by defeat.[33] It is not clear whether the 'camélia vivant' of the last line is in apposition to the 'Amour mort' or to 'moi', so speaker, flower, love, and wound are telescoped together—fusing abstract and concrete. There is a brutal contrast between the parallel constructions 'Amour mort' (the buttonhole camellia and emblem of love) and 'Camélia vivant' (the speaker who has lost the duel). They both refer to the subject, and the opposed epithets suggest he is torn between life and death. He is alive but his love is lost to him in defeat. The compressed images emphasize the pain of the impossible love, which feels like a death in life.

Rather than taking the observed detail of the crushed yellow flower as a starting point and either recounting its story or transforming it into a symbol, the poem began as a self-conscious piece of art, only to end with the debris of reality. The beginning of the poem showed a confident 'je' effortlessly translating events into metaphor, but this was thrown into disarray by events, and the confusion conveys the emotional intensity. The poem creates a dreamlike atmosphere, stylizes thought processes, and transforms pessimism about love into something more metaphorical. 'Duel aux camélias', like 'Steam-boat', plays on the distance between author and speaker not just to make the subject a figure of fun, but also to place a personal drama in a broader context. One of the ways in which dramatic monologues engineer distance between the

[33] This hollow/shaft dichotomy is picked up in 'Fleur d'art', discussed above, a sonnet with which this is paired, and which emphasizes the treacherous nature of the woman for whom he is fighting. In 'Fleur d'art', the man is again wounded, but it is the woman who wields the weapon.

poet and his lyric persona is irony, but they do more than just reducing persona to clown. The speaker may merely be trapped, as Griffiths describes the speakers in Browning's monologues: 'the speaker clutches on to what he cares for, his speech expresses his own conviction of the firmness of his grip; the patterning of his speech by the poet shows him rather to be in the clutches of his own passion.'[34] The complexity of the overall structure tells us far more than the limited speaker can express.

MULTI-LAYERED MONOLOGUES AND THE ANTI-INTELLECTUAL AESTHETIC

In his love poems, Corbière evokes the unmediated confusion of experience rather than explaining it by means of commonplaces or analogies. Similar techniques are applied to the experience of creativity in two important monologues which use sensations to explore the poet's psyche and convey his aesthetic ideas: 'Décourageux' reflects on the relationship between experience and art, and 'Rapsodie du sourd' describes the poetic vocation as a physical debilitation.

'Décourageux' presents an unproductive artist, beginning with the paradoxical 'Ce fut un vrai poète: Il n'avait pas de chant' (1). It is uncertain whether his silence is the result of superiority, purity, and perfectionism, or whether he is simply lazy. The first five stanzas present the poet in the third person, and, as in 'La Pipe au poète', bohemian and bourgeois points of view are superimposed to cast doubt on his worth. Admiring phrases like 'Pur héros', 'Chercheur infatigable', and 'grande âme' suggest a connoisseur who venerates the artist for sacrificing his life to his art, but these are undercut by suggestions that he is an idle dreamer:

> — Songe-creux : bien profond il resta dans son rêve;
> Sans lui donner la forme en baudruche qui crève,
> Sans *ouvrir le bonhomme*, et se chercher dedans. (5–7)

Lines 6–7 sound like a bohemian poet justifying his creative silence by listing aesthetic strategies to be avoided. First he rejects being inspired by dreams, because giving them a shape would only deflate them or reveal them to be hot air, and secondly he rejects introspective confession. The poet thus seems to be rejecting the Romantic view of

[34] *The Printed Voice of Victorian Poetry*, 216.

poetry, yet elsewhere is mocked for subscribing to it. The terms used are reminiscent of Leconte de Lisle's notorious criticism of poets who persisted in reproducing tired Romantic models. Leconte de Lisle had accused such writers of being 'rêveurs d'imitation',[35] and Corbière's poet is compared to literary models ('pur héros de roman', l.8). Leconte de Lisle had also argued that the neo-Romantics were despised by 'la foule' and resistant to 'travail sérieux',[36] and Corbière echoes these criticisms by defining the poet's work as 'faire rien' (14–16) and summing up his attitude to ordinary mortals thus:

> — Chercheur infatigable : Ici-bas où l'on rame,
> Il regardait ramer, du haut de sa grande âme,
> Fatigué de pitié pour ceux qui ramaient bien… (10–12)

It is as though Corbière is engaging in the literary polemic from within the medium of verse itself, in preference to issuing a separate manifesto. Rather than directly attacking or defending the aesthetic of his poet-persona, he evokes the sensation of uncertainty over his value.

There follows a monologue in which the poet, an idealistic thinker, gives his own reasons for being unproductive. He begins by attacking artists he does not wish to emulate (first those who commodify art and secondly those who confuse raw inspiration with art) and then goes on to question the very essence of art itself:

> — Il disait : « Ô naïf Océan! Ô fleurettes,
> Ne sommes-nous pas là, sans peintres, ni poètes!…
> Quel vitrier a peint! quel aveugle a chanté!…
> Et quel vitrier chante en raclant sa palette.
> « Ou quel aveugle a peint avec sa clarinette!
> — Est-ce l'art?… »
> — Lui resta dans le Sublime Bête
> Noyer son orgueil vide et sa virginité. (29–35)

The literal message of lines 29–30, that art is redundant as it duplicates reality, is undercut by the ironic excess of simplicity; the repetition of the reverent 'ô', the epithet 'naïf', and the dimininutive 'fleurettes' all suggest that the concept of the natural is bogus. However, non-mimetic modes of art are then treated with equal derision; lines 31–5 imply that the suggestive blending of senses, or synaesthesia, results from use of inappropriate tools rather than from the artistry of a Swedenborgian

[35] 'Préface des *Poèmes Antiques*', in *Articles, Préfaces, Discours*, 116.
[36] Ibid. 111.

mystic. Angelet says Corbière is here attacking the incoherence of modern art.[37] However, it is not clear whether this incoherence is a source of euphoria or disdain, because the lack of conjunctions makes it difficult to establish the relationship between these juxtaposed exclamations. Are the 'vitrier' and the 'aveugle' specific examples of the 'peintres' and 'poètes' or are they a completely different kind of artist?[38] Is he mocking their trickery of the senses, or admiring their creative power? Is the question 'est-ce l'art?…' uttered by the philistine who fails to recognize this fusion of forms, or the idealistic artist mocking it as a cheap trick? As usual, the word 'art' is double-edged. Institutional Art is condemned, but the linguistic exuberance of this playful synaesthesia suggests that the artist who views the world as if through the eyes of a 'vitrier' or a blind person can perceive it anew and create a new kind of art rooted in sensation. The poet character rejects this aesthetic in order to remain pure, in the realm of 'le Sublime Bête'. He is hampered by an excess of both idealism and cynicism, which prevent him from producing art, but the language of the poem nonetheless puts an anti-intellectual aesthetic into practice. As a metapoetic formula, 'Sublime Bête' sounds like a residue of a manifesto, and encompasses both idealism and cynicism. Christopher Pilling acknowledges the ambiguity of 'Sublime Bête' in his lively translation of *Les Amours jaunes*, by translating it as 'Sublime Asininity', but also offering the alternative 'Foolish Sublimity'.[39] There is an extremely fine line between creation and vacuity, as there is between greatness and idiocy in art, recalling Baudelaire's affirmation that great poetry is 'essentiellement bête'.[40] The critical voice in this poem is the cynical side of the artist, the dreamer is the other side, and the sense of the poem as a whole lies in the relationship between the voices. Corbière builds up a complex picture of competing opinions on aesthetic matters.[41] Whereas the 'Paris' sonnets separate the cynic and the dreamer into separate voices quarrelling with

[37] *La Poétique de Tristan Corbière*, 60.

[38] The 'vitrier' recalls the ambiguous figure in Baudelaire's prose poem 'Le Mauvais vitrier' and alludes more generally to the uncertain status of this type, hovering between being artists and being artisans. See Steve Murphy, '"Le Mauvais vitrier" or La crise du verre', *Romanic Review*, 81 (1990), 339–49 and Richard Burton, 'Destruction as Creation: "Le Mauvais Vitrier" and the Poetics and Politics of Violence', *Romanic Review*, 83 (1992), 297–322.

[39] *These Jaundiced Loves: A Translation of Tristan Corbière's 'Les Amours jaunes'*, trans. Christopher Pilling (Calstock: Peterloo Poets, 1995), 181.

[40] *Œuvres complètes*, ii. 11.

[41] The technique is similar to that of Rimbaud's 'Ce qu'on dit au poète à propos des fleurs', which, as Steve Murphy has pointed out, is a dialogue between a poet of l'Art pour

each other, 'Décourageux' fuses the two in a language of sensation. The indirect discourse of irony here evokes aesthetic ideas, just as in other poems it evokes emotions.

'Rapsodie du sourd' is a monologue by another voice which hovers between the asinine and the sublime. The speaker is literally trapped by his deafness, which is an inner exile as he is surrounded by people with whom he cannot communicate. His monologue is prefaced by a brief introduction in the third person:

> L'homme de l'art lui dit : — Fort bien, restons-en là.
> Le traitement est fait : vous êtes sourd. Voilà
> Comme quoi vous avez l'organe bien perdu. — (1–3)

'L'homme de l'art' literally denotes a doctor, although in a surreal twist this medic makes his patient deaf, although there is the possibility that the patient has perversely asked to be made deaf (line 7 suggests he is paying for the privilege). The deaf man describes in graphic detail the sensation of this aural isolation, which is a way of lamenting the artist's isolation. He also shows how the poet's awareness that he is ridiculous only contributes to his torture. His initial response to deafness is relief at being able to ignore the ridicule, but this quickly degenerates into hysteria. The intensity of suffering recalls 'Cris d'aveugle', but the victim is more self-aware. As so often in Corbière, the speaker both uses humour himself, and is made a figure of fun by the poem, describing himself as a 'mannequin muet, à fil banal' (13). He describes his suffering from the outside, looking at himself through the eyes of those he encounters, such as friends in the street. At first he is preoccupied by his public appearance and his relationship with others, but the focus gradually moves inward, and elemental physical processes—such as excretion (43), a pounding in the head (47–8), and heartbeat (51)—come to dominate. He refers to his poetry as discordant nonsense, and the artistry of the poem originates from outside himself. The writing articulates the mental processes of the speaker as though he is not in control of them, which suggests the workings of the unconscious. Although he cannot hear, he visualizes sounds from the outside world internally:

> — Va donc, balancier soûl affolé dans ma tête!
> Bats en branle ce bon tam-tam, chaudron fêlé
> Qui rend la voix de femme ainsi qu'une sonnette (47–9)

l'Art and a bourgeois, and the author's stance can only be deduced as contradicting the explicit statements of these adversaries, *Les Marges du premier Verlaine* (Paris: Champion, 2003), 51.

The instrument used to produce these sounds in his head is the woefully inadequate cracked cauldron, which recalls Flaubert's 'La parole humaine est comme un chaudron fêlé où nous battons des mélodies à faire danser les ours, quand on voudrait attendrir les étoiles.'[42] Like Flaubert, Corbière expresses a fear of cliché, lamenting that sounds lose their particularity and are reduced to generalized stereotypes such as the bell-like woman's voice. However, in the effort to counteract this loss, memory and imagination serve to concentrate the experience. Cutting off sense impressions from the outside only heightens awareness of them. They are examined from the outside and recreated in language. The deaf man, like the poet, must reproduce sensations in his own idiom, and uses language to cast a new light on them.

'LITANIE DU SOMMEIL': LIBERATION

Corbière is constantly twisting language out of its habitual forms in order to convey the intensity of sensations, and in 'Litanie du Sommeil' he takes this aesthetic to an extreme. He pushes language to its limits in order to convey sensory experience in a visionary way, by extending the techniques of the other dreamlike poems, such as building uncertainty into its syntax and verbalizing the mental flux. Irony no longer functions merely as a corrective device or to represent psychological contradictions, but its open-endedness acts as a triumphant release. The autonomous sensations and the polysemy of contradictory language combine to break down the boundaries between subjects. Many of Corbière's poems use repetition and parallelisms to suggest the obsessions of a particular mind, and these techniques are taken to a new level in 'Litanie du Sommeil', which juxtaposes the preoccupations of a plurality of different individuals. This is a novel way of using private experience to express collective concerns, it transcends the individual personality by using enumeration to convey the sheer multiplicity of humankind, rather than having a single authoritative voice give his opinion about what they share.

'Litanie du Sommeil' is flippantly located by its peritext, 'Lits divers — Une nuit de jour', which, on a cursory reading, suggests a womanizer enjoying a hard day's night, when in reality it describes the universal experience of sleep. The extraordinary originality of this poem lies in the

[42] *Œuvres complètes de Gustave Flaubert*, i. *Madame Bovary*, 220.

way language is deployed to evoke the intangible reality of sleep. André Breton was struck by the freedom of 'Litanie du Sommeil', which he quoted in support of his assertion that 'C'est sans doute avec les *Amours jaunes* que l'automatisme verbal s'installe dans la poésie française.'[43] Angelet disagrees with Breton's emphasis on automatism and argues that its disorder is 'parfaitement logique, voire rhétorique',[44] and that it amplifies traditional devices such as images, the rhyme, oxymoron, and antithesis in order to create 'une réalité spirituelle indéfinissable'.[45] Taking this observation as a starting point, I shall examine in more detail how the unusual rhetorical structures suggest a spiritual dimension.

The dense verbal texture needs to be examined in the light of the poem's overall structure. Despite being a sprawling succession of sequences of uneven length, it has a distinct architecture, as shown by Laroche, who attaches much importance to its symmetry and its position at the centre of a symmetrical book.[46] 'Litanie du Sommeil' begins and ends with short sequences in which a disruptive voice asks a bourgeois 'ruminant' whether he has ever experienced insomnia, and eulogizes its tortures and wonders. Within this outer frame, the main body of the poem is a torrent of visionary definitions of 'sommeil', addressed to sleep itself. This central section falls into two halves, the first entirely in feminine rhymes, the second entirely in masculine rhymes, so the two are opposed in a monolithic dichotomy, rather than alternating line by line. In the framing passages addressed to the bourgeois, the speaker introduces extreme sensations via a series of questions, rather than simply recounting an experience of them. This injects a sense of urgency, gives the poem a dialogic quality, and enables the speaker to avoid specifying who has really had the experience, so sensations take on a life of their own, independent of any particular subject. While showing that these sensations are not the preserve of the bourgeois, whose blunted senses are incapable of such adventure, the speaker is not openly declaring that he has felt them himself. Is the main apostrophe to sleep uttered by a deliriously exhausted insomniac in an attempt to evoke or invoke what eludes him? Serge Meitinger says insomnia is external to sleep, and so the phenomenon of sleep can be most clearly seen from the insomniac's perspective.[47] Someone who is fast asleep cannot articulate the experience in the first person at the moment it occurs, but an insomniac is the next best thing, being obsessed by sleep

[43] *Anthologie de l'humour noir*, 266. [44] *La Poétique de Tristan Corbière*, 60–1.
[45] Ibid. 98–9. [46] *Tristan Corbière, ou les voix de la corbière*, 81–4.
[47] 'Tristan Corbière dans le texte: Une lecture des *Amours jaunes*', 133.

and available to voice it. The poem begins by praising sleep in order to highlight the horror of insomnia, but ultimately shows insomnia to be an equally powerful experience, so sleep and insomnia are not diametrically opposed. 'Sommeil' could mean sleep itself or merely tiredness, which also blurs the opposition.

Sleep is the second person in this poem, and the speaker builds up a picture of his elusive addressee through a litany of definitions. This hysterical show is put on for the benefit of the bourgeois, but the punchline is provided by the voice of sleep itself, which interrupts the litany in the line 'Le sommeil s'éveillant me dit: Tu m'as scié' (147). The interjection by sleep renders the overall structure of the poem comic. The vociferous performance has aroused sleep itself and thus paradoxically destroyed it. The capitals underline the enormity of something as intangible as sleep answering back, and also the paradox that by waking sleep the poet has killed it. This line reconfigures the epigraph to the poem, 'J'ai scié le sommeil', itself a quotation from *Macbeth*: 'Macbeth hath murdered sleep'. This sort of paradox also occurs in metaphysical poetry such as Donne's 'Death thou shalt die'.[48] Colloquially, 'scier' means to bore someone, and 'scie' is a cliché or joke, so sleep seems to be objecting to the poet's representation of itself. This only suggests that sleep is even more fantastic than the poem can ever express. The drama of sleep itself entering into dialogue with the poem suggests a contest between the artist and his subject matter. Baudelaire says 'L'étude du beau est un duel où l'artiste crie de frayeur avant d'être vaincu',[49] and here it is sleep that cries out, but its extinction is a victory as it silences the poet. Both poet and insomniac are in combat with the forces of nature.

Sleep is just one of many voices in this poem, which is a culmination of the polyphonic aesthetic; the torrent of images, puns, clichés, references to songs and myths seems to embody the unconscious of the nineteenth century as a whole. It is as though the epoch's hidden life has found a way of expressing itself, free of a controlling authorial voice.[50] The sense of a linear vocal performance is largely eclipsed by the dense collage texture. This poem is even littered with references to other poems in the

[48] From 'Death be not proud', *Divine Meditations*, 10, in John Donne, *The Complete English Poems* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1986), 313.

[49] 'Le *Confiteor* de l'artiste'.

[50] Many of the formulations used to describe sleep recall those used at the time to sum up the nineteenth century. See *L'Invention du XIXe siècle par lui-même (littérature, histoire, société)*, ed. Alain Corbin, Pierre Georgel et al. (Paris: Klincksieck, 1999) for a discussion of the century's self-awareness.

book.[51] It emphasizes the democratic nature of sleep, describing it as 'Sommeil. — Ciel-de-lit de ceux qui n'en ont pas!' (16). It is a punning version of Baudelaire's 'La Mort des pauvres' which uses the litany form to define death:

> C'est un Ange qui tient dans ses doigts magnétiques
> Le sommeil et le don des rêves extatiques,
> Et qui refait le lit des gens pauvres et nus;
>
> C'est la gloire des dieux, c'est le grenier mystique,
> C'est la bourse du pauvre et sa patrie antique,
> C'est le portique ouvert sur les Cieux inconnus![52]

Corbière's 'Litanie du Sommeil' suggests that such 'cieux inconnus' are intimately bound up with *lieux communs*, as he plays on clichés and emphasizes that individual consciousness is shaped by public places and communal myths. Indeed, the poem as a whole reads like an expansion of the proverb 'qui dort dîne'.

Corbière systematically subverts clichés, by juxtaposing disparate elements and inserting them into unexpected forms, taking his lack of syntactic articulation to extremes. The basic mechanism is that each line offers noun phrases in apposition to the word 'sommeil', for instance:

> Sommeil — Loup-Garou gris! Sommeil Noir de fumée!
> Sommeil! — Loup de velours, de dentelle embaumée! (26–7)

The nominal style involves frequent genitive constructions. In this example, the basic noun phrases are genitive phrases in themselves. Elsewhere the genitive is used to link a particular kind of sleep to an appropriate sleeper, and the word 'sommeil' is often replaced by a metaphor, as in 'Patient Auditeur de l'incompris qui cause' (48). Sleep is systematically the positive value in all equations, and often counterbalances a negative element. Formulae like 'Contre-poids des poids faux de l'épicier de Sort' (101) indicate the fundamental unfairness of life, whereas others play on paradoxes to suggest the psychological complexity of the sleepers, as in 'Surface des profonds! Profondeur des jocrisses!' (76). These elliptic formulae are vivid, but emphasis and grammatical causality is vague. 'Profondeur des jocrisses' could mean that 'sleep is *like* the hidden depths of simpletons', 'sleep *gives* unexpected depth to simpletons', or that 'simpletons experience sleep as something

[51] 'Déjeuner de soleil' (23), 'La Rapsode foraine' (34), 'Paria' (40), 'Sonnet posthume' (44–5), 'Saint Tupetu de Tu-pe-tu' (66), 'Libertà' (108), 'Féminin singulier' (122).

[52] *Œuvres complètes*, i. 127.

deep (whereas for the wise it is light relief)'. They simultaneously give a powerful image and describe an equivalent for sensations such as relief ('Boulet des forcenés, Liberté des captifs!' (108), or sudden power ('Pays où le muet se réveille prophète', 24). When the genitive constructions are completely ambiguous there is often a hallucinatory effect. For instance, 'Crépuscule flottant de l'*Être ou n'Être pas!*…' (85) combines a pictorial notation with a Shakespeare quotation. The latter may be a cliché, but it also expresses the ultimate existential crisis. The significance of yoking it with the sunset is uncertain; the link between the 'drame solaire' and Hamlet's contemplated death could be purely analogical, the former being a visual counterpart of the latter. On the other hand there could be a causal link, if the glory of the sunset is being given as an answer to the doubter. In a single short line Corbière telescopes together phrases which are not just uttered by different voices but are completely different kinds of utterance.

The successive verse paragraphs have discrete thematic preoccupations, and each could be read as an objective correlative for a particular realm of experience. The following couplet uses the ambiguous genitive construction to revisit the question of sexual politics:

> Du jeune homme rêveur Singulier Féminin!
> De la femme rêvant pluriel masculin! (122–3)

In this instance, the last term in each line represents sleep. The poem constantly specifies what sleep brings to different individuals, and here it brings the illusion of proximity to others. The man dreams of a single idol whereas the woman fantasizes about a stream of lovers. Whereas most of the lines in 'Litanie du Sommeil' are syntactically autonomous, here line 123 is generated by line 122, giving a chain of unreciprocated love: the young man dreams of a unique woman, without realizing that she in turn is dreaming of promiscuity.

Other sequences tackle more cosmic concerns. The genitive construction builds ambiguity into 'Ô corde-de-pendu de la Planète lourde!' (67). It may seem surprising that sleep is equated with a hangman's rope, but in popular superstition such a rope brings good luck,[53] so the line means that sleep brings relief when the world weighs one down. However, other more troubling possibilities linger in the background; it sounds as though the rope has been used to hang the planet (an image akin to Apollinaire's 'soleil cou coupé'),[54] as though humanity

[53] Baudelaire plays on this in 'La Corde'. See also Corbière's 'Pierrot pendu', *OC* 890.
[54] 'Zone', 155.

were adrift in a cosmic catastrophe clinging to the talismanic rope for consolation. Either way, sleep is a restorative antidote to the cares of the world, and yet sinisterly foreshadows death. Corbière suggests that life is unsatisfactory and limited, and uses sleep as an extended metaphor to tackle such metaphysical questions whilst remaining grounded in physical experience and avoiding orthodox theology.

Sleep is systematically the opposite of the yoke which shackles the life of any particular individual, and for Laroche sleep is reduced to a 'fonction d'inverseur'.[55] Sleep is thus an embodiment of irony, and its constant negation serves not to undercut but to complement, and thus it functions as a positive liberation:

> Boulet des forcenés, Liberté des captifs!
> Sabbat du somnambule et Relais des poussifs! —
> Somme! Actif du passif et Passif de l'actif!
> Pavillon de *la Folle* et *Folle* du poncif!…
> — Ô viens changer de patte au cormoran pensif! (108–12)

The kind of reversals already seen in 'Libertà' are here taken to new heights, and the delirium is gradually amplified in the course of this sequence. It opens with genitive constructions in which complements are tailored to specific items, whether a concrete noun for a concrete noun ('Boulet des forcenés'), or an abstract noun for a concrete noun ('Liberté des captifs'). These two noun phrases are inversions of each other, just as there is antithesis within each phrase, so there are reversals within reversals even within single lines. The contradiction is stepped up in the subsequent almost nonsensical yokings of opposites. Effects of particular absurdity occur when an abstract noun is linked to another, as in 'Actif du passif et Passif de l'actif'. 'Pavillon de *la Folle* et *Folle* du poncif!…' is unsettling because each half of the line proposes a phrase which reverses expectations, but, in contrast to line 108, the two halves are not even parallel. Furthermore, 'folle' is repeated in different positions, but with different meanings in each. 'Pavillon de *la Folle*' literalizes the idiom 'folle du logis' (imagination) by substituting an alternative dwelling. '*Folle* du poncif' could be a stereotypical representation of a mad woman, or a woman mad about clichés, or, in a more abstract extension of the 'folle du logis', it could refer to the kind of imaginative reverie which cliché induced in Flaubert. Does sleep transform everyday platitudes into something fantastic, or

[55] *Tristan Corbière, ou les voix de la corbière*, 87.

bring out creativity latent in them? In either case, clichés are a rich source of wild dreams, and wild dreams need the sheltered state of sleep in order to occur. Everything is brought up against its contrary, but the effect is not so much to cancel out opposites as to suggest that everything contains its opposite, a strategy which conveys all the fertility of dream logic.

The poem enacts the process of generating paradoxes. Rather than describing a sleeper's dream, the poem forces the reader to work through the dizzying succession of contradictions, and thus draws attention to the mechanics of the process. Rather than using verbs to spell out how sleep affects a sleeper, the poem uses ambiguous nominal phrases to make sleep an entity in itself. Sensations are not punctual events or permanent states but solidified as objects in themselves. It is as though the poem lays bare the unconscious activity of processing banal material and making unexpected connections which defamiliarize reality. The verse does not expound a sequence of thoughts, but stages continual conflict between impulses which are never synthesized.

A world-view is built into lines indirectly rather than asserted. Dream is not a mere abstraction opposed to reality, but is concretized as a surreal distortion of familiar material. A philosophical awareness of contingency is linked to the everyday activity of dishwashing:

> Trop-plein de l'existence, et Torchon neuf qu'on passe
> Au CAFÉ DE LA VIE, à chaque assiette grasse!
> Grain d'ennui qui nous pleut de l'ennui des espaces! (37–9)

This is no Romantic 'mage' reporting a grand vision, but just an insomniac exposing his everyday troubles. The mundane details are plausible dream material, and, as in a dream, they also suggest something more than themselves; trivial decor generates metaphysical speculation. Existential and everyday realms coincide in the name 'Café de la Vie', just as they do in the names of real newspapers:

> Voix mortelle qui vibre aux immortelles ondes!
> Réveil des échos morts et des choses profondes,
> — Journal du soir: Temps, Siècle et Revue des deux mondes! (51–3)

At one level the enumeration of journals looks like a patchwork of everyday bric-a-brac, but the previous two lines create a poetic context which invites us to consider the titles of the publications as words in themselves, and activates their latent capacity for portentous resonance. Just as the mortal voice of line 51 has immortal resonance, so these ephemeral journals have a hint of eternity. Sleep is thus a transitory

physical experience which permits the poet to explore the major themes of love, death, and art, and gives individuals access to the eternal.

The theme of time runs through this poem, which Marshall Lindsay describes as 'vraie poésie cosmique',[56] in which 'le poète veut tout simplement détruire le temps'.[57] Sleep lies at the interface of the known and the unknown, being both a relief from life and a foretaste of death. Corbière plays with the cliché that sleep adumbrates death, and interweaves it with the idea that sleep defies ordinary temporality:

> Sommeil! — Autant de pris sur notre éternité!
> Tour du cadran *à blanc!* Clou du Mont-de-Piété! (130–1)

This paradoxically combines everyday and cosmic views of time. Line 130 is contradictory, for if eternity can be taken in advance it is not eternity. Sleep takes place in clock time whereas eternity transcends it, but Corbière measures both on the same scale. 'Tour du cadran *à blanc*' suggests that we gain time by sleeping. This may refer to the sense of having undertaken long voyages in a single night, but it may also refer to eternity. If sleep is like a preview of eternity, the afterlife will feel like real clock time but it will not be counting down to an end. The two statements seem to contradict each other but this collapses the opposition between sleep and afterlife. The pawnshop is again about borrowing time and echoes the financial metaphor of 'autant de pris'. Sleep, like a pawnshop, temporarily alleviates problems. In this vision, time carries a *chibouk* (a Turkish pipe with a long stem) and not a scythe (142), suggesting death is oblivion rather than a brutal severance.

Another line with existential reverberations is the 'Arc-en-ciel miroitant! Faux du vrai! Vrai du faux!' (138). Linking abstractions in a genitive structure makes it difficult to extrapolate a stable meaning. 'Faux du vrai' could mean either that sleep is only a distorted image of everyday reality, or that it is a debased version of a far greater reality. Describing sleep as 'Vrai du faux' implies that the distorted version might conceal greater truths than waking life, or that sleep is a more real transcendence than any illusory notion of eternal life. The line goes round in circles, as 'faux du vrai' could be the illusion of truth, and 'vrai du faux' the truth of illusion, but the difference between them is uncertain. It is impossible to get outside the opposition and decide what is true and what is false, as they are continually undermining and yet defining each other. The rainbow is a visible analogy for this shimmering intangibility. The line

[56] *Le Temps jaune*, 109. [57] Ibid., 75.

as a whole indirectly poses the question of whether or not to believe in an afterlife, and shows that eternity and earthly life inhabit each other rather than being mutually exclusive opposites. The juxtaposition of a sensuous image with cerebral paradoxes generates a multiplicity of meanings and demonstrates how closely feeling and thought are interlocked. The paratactic structure renders the texture of the dreaming experience, whilst the specific terms combined here invite reflection on the universal themes of love, death, belief, and art.

There is something circular about this poem as a whole, as though sleep is addressing itself. Dreamwork does not normally process sleep itself, so it is not surprising that it wakes itself up; if one dreams that one is asleep, one generally wakes up. The humour of 'Litanie du Sommeil' is a liberating verbal intoxication rather than derision directed at a particular target, as is appropriate to its democratic principles. Sensations are detached from the individuals who experience them, made the focus of the poem, and examined in their own right. The poem refuses first-person self-expression, and experiments with the use of puns and indirect compressed nominal phrases to suggest unconscious depths. The subject is not an individual but the universal experience of sleep.

Christopher Prendergast argues that the aesthetic of sensation which emerged in this period 'reflects in part the dream of a literary phenomenology approximating as closely as possible to the rhythms of the body', and the use of sleep in 'Litanie du Sommeil' certainly bears this out.[58] Prendergast laments that this sort of writing 'speaks of a severance of the category of "sensation" from the social, of a tendency to pose sensory experience as essentially "private", beyond the resources of a shared public discourse.'[59] However, in 'Litanie du Sommeil', Corbière merges the physical and private experience of sleep with a sense of the collectivity. He extends his practice of incorporating oral fragments which convey social interrelationships between speakers, and of using linguistic discontinuities to signal the shock of the outside world. The urban environment features strongly in the imagery of 'Litanie du Sommeil', and the spasmodic nature of its flow seems to be an effect of the pace, artifice, and uncertainty of modern life. In poems like the 'Paris' sonnets, Corbière describes the city as a place of fast and fluid sensations, and in 'Litanie du Sommeil' the subject is completely dissolved into this flux.

[58] *Paris and the Nineteenth Century*, 160. [59] Ibid. 160.

'Litanie du Sommeil' is an extreme example of the way Corbière exposes the inner life and unravels it through autonomous objectified images which are detached from the self. He distils sense experience and gives it a linguistic life of its own. The techniques used to evoke the content of consciousness have much in common with those used to describe the Brittany landscape. For Corbière, sensations are as lapidary as the granite rocks, and elusive states of mind can be captured in words. He depicts emotions as concrete things apprehended with all the senses, rather than as sentiment which is 'the vague expression of the vague'.[60] Proust says of Baudelaire's expression of sentiments: 'il semble qu'il ait fait une peinture extérieure de leur forme, sans sympathiser avec eux',[61] and Corbière extends this practice. He evokes the very movements of consciousness as well as its content. Sense experience is detached from narrative context and also from habitual syntactic structures.

This dissolution of personality had already been anticipated in the monologues, many of which do not so much stage the subject vacillating as they displace the vacillation into the linguistic texture. Corbière changes the relationship between performativity and inwardness, and makes the inner life a strange object. He uses dramatic techniques like dialogue both to project the self as a showy communicator and to convey private dramas. Irony is no longer antiphrasis used to communicate a message to an audience indirectly, but is a means of expressing inwardness. Corbière does not represent individuals actively introspecting, but the introspection takes place at the level of the poem itself, and the speakers are often not aware of it. When speakers seem to be blurting out their irritations, the sinuous and layered effects peculiar to irony reveal far more than they are aware. Sometimes the effect may be simply to undermine the speaker and point out that he or she is unreliable. At other times irony may be a way of conducting an undercover investigation of the underlying ramifications of an issue. The subject may be trapped because he reveals himself to be a buffoon, or because existence is a bad joke—there is a fine line between comedy and tragedy.

The monologues, exploration of consciousness, wordplay, and use of specific concrete content are thus all ways of showing what it *feels* like to live with metaphysical uncertainty. Corbière's poems contain no separate thoughts which can simply be lifted out and read as impersonal

[60] *Varieties of Metaphysical Poetry*, 200.
[61] Marcel Proust, *Contre Sainte-Beuve* (Paris: Gallimard, 1954), 211.

statements, but ideas are conveyed through the evaluative and expressive orientation of the language. Bakhtin shows that speech embodies a concrete consciousness, so when 'the living voice of an integral person' describes an event, the thought of that individual is 'drawn into [the] event, becomes itself part of the event and takes on that special quality of an "idea-feeling" '.[62] This novelistic synthesis is close to Eliot's 'thought-feeling'. Both Eliot and Bakhtin show that treating subjectivity in this way results in a very precise style. For Eliot, it is a postulate implicit in all metaphysical poetry that nothing is ineffable, that the most rarefied feelings can be exact and exactly expressed.[63] At the level of style, Corbière's precise evocations of sensation both explore the sensuous particularity of thought and concretize abstract ideas by making them accessible to the senses. At the level of world-view, Corbière describes the absence of an ideal as physical discomfort rather than conceptualizing it. Poems like 'À une camarade' show the philosophy of doubt impinging on the poet's actions. Self-consciousness and awareness of the void come into conflict with desire, so there is an ironic disparity between thought and feeling. Where his contemporary Cros uses humour to mock the ideal and can then indulge in it as a fantasy, Corbière was more interested in reconciling poetry with everyday reality. He uses irony to convey what life feels like when lived with scepticism, and, rather than declaiming reasons for the loss of belief, he mocks the very scepticism itself. This is one of the ways in which he anticipates Laforgue, although the later poet's speakers are more aware of the philosophy behind their irony, and inclined to make statements like 'mes grandes angoisses métaphysiques | Sont passées à l'état de chagrins domestiques'.[64]

Laforgue ultimately moves into free verse in order to capture fluctuating sensations. One of the justifications for free verse was that it was able to create its own rhythmic patterns in order to register the psychological particularities of an individual consciousness. However, Corbière builds psychological realism into the existing structures of verse itself by using irony's indirection to suggest tangled thought processes, to set up self-protective layers, and to explore in language things which could not otherwise be expressed. Sometimes personae make a joke of their suffering to make the reader laugh with rather than at them, but

[62] *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, 10–11.

[63] *Varieties of Metaphysical Poetry*, 200.

[64] Jules Laforgue, 'Complainte d'une convalescence en mai', 29–30, *Les Complaintes*, in *Œuvres complètes*, ed. Jean-Louis Debauve et al. (Lausanne: L'Âge d'Homme, 1986), i. 616.

the reader's laugh is likely to be as ambivalent as the *rire jaune* of the persona. The reader is thus made to experience the physical reality of forced laughter, and since Corbière's poetry represents ideas as physical sensations, it is appropriate that it should provoke a physiological response. The mechanism of systematic derision or multidirectional irony which evokes the loss of values is taken to extremes in 'Litanie du Sommeil', where it acts as a kind of release. Ironic dramatic structures contribute to the subtle representation of consciousness, but the richness of the verse stems largely from its rhetorical surface. Irony and sensation take on a life of their own and replace narrative and personality. Sensations, like irony, are not just an intermittent textual feature, but become themselves structuring principles of the verse.

5

'Rondels pour après': Circular Suggestion

The sprawl of 'Litanie du Sommeil' was one way of liberating poetry within the constraints of verse, but the final section of *Les Amours jaunes*, the 'Rondels pour après', represents a very different kind of departure. It comprises six poems experimenting with a traditional verse form, which proves to be a new form of liberation. Corbière pushes his style to the limits in these short texts which are very different from the rest of his work, aptly described by Laforgue as 'la plus fine, la plus ténue, la plus pure partie comme art. *Rondels pour après* — de fines mauves pâles filigranées d'ironie sur un ton posthume.'[1] They are a discrete sequence, and marked out by their italic type. Since the rest of *Les Amours jaunes* is in roman type punctuated with italicized words, the *rondels* function as a ghostly typographic negative of the book. Nothing is known of the circumstances of their composition, but they are generally assumed to have been written after the other poems in the published volume *Les Amours jaunes*, so it is sometimes argued that they constitute Corbière's last word, and that he might have continued in this vein, had he not died. However, the handful of poems which he is known to have written in the short period between the publication of *Les Amours jaunes* in 1873 and his death in 1875 returned to the more derisive style.[2] The uncertain genesis of the texts, combined with their inherent ambiguity, has made the *rondels* something of an enigma.

They are frequently eclipsed by the violence of the other poems, and commentators tend to valorize this elusive quality by saying that they resist analysis. Those seeking an architecture in Corbière's œuvre emphasize their representation of death as a harmonious liberation from the trials of life that fill the rest of *Les Amours jaunes*. However, it is

[1] 'Une étude sur Corbière', 13.

[2] 'Paris diurne', 'Paris nocturne', 'Petit coucher', and 'Moi ton amour' were handwritten by Corbière in his personal edition of *Les Amours jaunes*, and are included in *OC*.

difficult to discuss them thematically, as their content is inextricably bound up in their linguistic form. Laforgue is right to emphasize craft, for their simplicity is deceptive and their language fraught with ambiguity. The mysterious atmosphere has tended to divert attention away from the linguistic inventiveness, which is less aggressive than that of the other poems. Robert Mitchell praises their visionary qualities, but says they are 'overshadowed by the more typical and stylistically interesting pieces of the first four sections of *Les Amours jaunes*'.[3] Their atmosphere needs to be seen as an effect produced by precise manipulation of language.

Such an approach is implicit in T. S. Eliot's brief comments on the *rondels*. He pinpoints something essential about Corbière's verse when he defines it as a 'product of thought-feeling and feeling-thought'.[4] Corbière does not expound ideas which one could paraphrase, but dissolves them into language such that they can only be sensed. 'Feeling' is no vague sensuality but an effect of the specific articulation of language—Eliot sees Corbière's centre of gravity as 'the *word* and the phrase'.[5] One cannot isolate a message, but the meaning is folded into the language itself. This inseparability of form and content is explicit in the title of the sequence. 'Rondels pour après' yokes a poetic form with the theme of death, in a formula which exemplifies the suggestive qualities of Corbière's language. It blurs temporality by projecting the *rondels*—which, being an archaic fixed form, belong in the past—into the future. It combines levity and seriousness by using the playfully inconsequent and childlike 'pour après' for the serious reality of death. The *rondels* are shot through with such complexity, so their verbal texture requires close examination.

In contrast to more canonical 'difficult' texts, such as Mallarmé's sonnets or Nerval's *Chimères*, there exists little interpretative groundwork on which to base a study of the *rondels*. Angelet refers to some devices in the *rondels*,[6] and Aragon and Bonnin's annotated edition indicates some of the locutions reworked by Corbière. Jean-Pierre Richard's valuable reading of 'Rondel' is the only exploration of a whole poem.[7] Otherwise, the brief discussions of the *rondels* refer to a certain clutch of features, mainly from the refrains. The extraordinary range of allusions and double meanings packed into these short poems has until now been overlooked. By analysing their formal structures

[3] *Tristan Corbière*, 144. [4] *The Varieties of Metaphysical Poetry*, 217.
[5] Ibid. [6] *La Poétique de Tristan Corbière*.
[7] Jean-Pierre Richard, *Pages Paysages: Microlectures II* (Paris: Seuil, 1994), 21–38.

and identifying material—mainly intertextual references and lexical information—which illuminates their polysemic texture, I aim to show how their open-endedness represents the culmination of Corbière's aesthetic. Since the movement of the *rondels* has to be traced through their language, and the multiplicity of meanings is part of the overall effect, I shall follow the convolutions of the texts in a series of close readings. I shall demonstrate how the poems work as a sequence, whilst basing my reading of each poem on a specific aspect of Corbière's poetic language.

'SONNET POSTHUME' : THE VOCATIVE

Dors : ce lit est le tien… Tu n'iras plus au nôtre.
— Qui dort dîne. — À tes dents viendra tout seul le foin.
Dors : on t'aimera bien — L'aimé c'est toujours l'Autre…
Rêve: La plus aimée est toujours la plus loin…

Dors : on t'appellera beau décrocheur d'étoiles!
Chevaucheur de rayons!… quand il fera bien noir;
Et l'ange du plafond, maigre araignée, au soir,
— Espoir — sur ton front vide ira filer ses toiles.

Museleur de voilette! un baiser sous le voile
T'attend… on ne sait où : ferme les yeux pour voir.
Ris : Les premiers honneurs t'attendent sous le poêle.

On cassera ton nez d'un bon coup d'encensoir,
Doux fumet !… pour la trogne en fleur, pleine de moelle
D'un sacristain très-bien, avec son éteignoir.

In a typically playful twist, the first poem in the sequence is not a *rondel* but a sonnet. Its title is a parodic rewriting of 'Rondels pour après'; the sonnet being a more elevated form than the song-like *rondel*, and 'posthume' a solemn version of the childish 'pour après'. Despite being the only one of these poems to use alexandrines, it is no more rhetorically declamatory than the others. Indeed, it sets up the oblique rhetorical situation which is used through most of the sequence and which generates much of its suggestive effect: a speaker of unspecified identity addresses a second person who is identified as a child and as a poet.[8] Artist and child were commonly associated

[8] In 'Rondel' (1) and 'Petit mort pour rire' (8) respectively.

in the period, but Corbière complicates the analogy by rendering his poet-child dead. Rather than being directed at the reader, the poems stage a monologue directed at this fictional addressee. The monologue functions as an indirect communication between the author and the reader, and its obliqueness forces the reader to participate actively in the process of making sense. The reader's role is particularly significant, since the audience is explicitly thematized in the texts. The 'Rondels pour après', like all Corbière's poems, project a strong sense of an expressive speaker, and are thus oriented towards Jakobson's 'emotive' function of language, which 'aims a direct expression of the speaker's attitude toward what he is talking about'.[9] The speaker's performance is entirely centred on the elusive addressee, so Jakobson's 'conative' function, which 'finds its purest grammatical expression in the vocative and imperative', is also foregrounded.[10] However, it is difficult to construct a persona behind the speaker (who never says *je*), or the addressee, or to define the nature of their relationship to each other.

Corbière plays on the vocative to generate irony, for the speaker's voice shifts between echoing the wonder of the child and mocking him, between offering and denying, or even does both in a single utterance, by using a reassuring tone to convey a sinister message. The combination of nurture and mockery was already apparent in 'La Pipe au poète'. In the *rondels* it is not certain whether the speaker is knowingly using childlike language to protect the child from death, or naively describing death in light-hearted terms. Furthermore, the speaker constructs the addressee through his monologue, so the two parties exist as a function of each other. They are two sides of the same persona, and the self is spoken as much as speaking. 'Sonnet posthume' uses this unusual rhetorical situation to generate ambiguities and to suggest the poet's self-division.

The speaker's utterance in the first quatrain is characterized by fragmented syntax and double-voicing, two strategies familiar from Corbière's more characteristic poetry. It resembles a patchwork of fragments of wisdom which do not add up to a total picture, the tone ranging from cosy domesticity in line 1 to oracular obscurity in line 4. The first two lines establish the equivalence between sleep and death that underpins the sequence as a whole. This familiar topos is conveyed indirectly, by the parental voice sending a child to bed in line 1. The imperative also has the sexual overtones of a couple banishing him from

[9] 'Linguistics and Poetics', 354. [10] Ibid. 355.

their bed, so the poem telescopes the successive stages of life: infancy, sexual maturity, and death. Resonances of popular culture—'tu n'iras plus au nôtre' which recalls the popular song 'Nous n'irons plus au bois', and the command 'Dors' which suggests a lullaby—are followed by a direct citation of the proverb 'qui dort dîne'. The practice of quotation is intimately bound up with the theme of childhood, a period when much is learnt through repetition and imitation. The proverb 'qui dort dîne' conflates two different appetites, suggesting that the more spiritual sustenance of sleep can assuage physical hunger. The speaker persuades the child to sleep by promising him pleasure, implying that his appetite is simultaneously for love and dreams, which are explicitly associated in line 4. As 'dîne' falls at the end of the syntactic segment, the word is rhythmically foregrounded, and the [i] is lengthened. This savouring of the vowel is macabre, given the equivocal associations of 'dîne'. It had been a metaphor for sleeping, but the rest of the line 'À tes dents viendra tout seul le foin' is a metonymic extension of its literal sense of eating, and the teeth a concrete accessory. The inversion foregrounds 'dents', which also repeats the [d] sound in a line dominated by the dental sounds [t] and [d]. This sound patterning imposes similarity on sleeping and eating, underlining the lexical sense of the proverb. The proverb also represents eating as an elemental need rather than the more socialized notion of dining. This animality is motivated at the verbal level, since the phrase recalls the idiom 'Il est bête à manger du foin', meaning to be very stupid. The reassuring tone of the speaker thus conceals an ironic barb, as one of the line's implications is to mock the dead hay-eater. 'À tes dents viendra tout seul le foin' also has more macabre associations; it recalls the colloquial expression 'manger les pissenlits par la racine', and could describe organic matter in the ground forcing itself into the mouth of the deceased, whose prominent teeth suggest a death's head. For all its sinister overtones, the comforting tone and passive construction of this line nonetheless offer a nurturing security to the infant. The polarity of cradle and grave representing the two boundaries of life is a familiar topos, but Corbière addresses the mystery of what lies beyond earthly existence in an oblique fashion rather than constructing a Hugolian antithesis.[11] These two dense lines conflate sleeping, love, infancy, and death. In the *rondels* such things coexist simultaneously, in contrast to much

[11] Such as 'Car dans tout berceau | Il germe une tombe', *Les Rayons et les Ombres*, XXXIX, *Œuvres poétiques*, i. 1110.

of Corbière's poetry which tends to juxtapose violently contrasting elements in sequence.

The fragmented syntax of these lines makes it hard to locate the emphasis or to decide how statements relate to each other, as there is no subordination. Corbière's customary dislocation is nonetheless smoothed over by the lulling quality of the language. Line 3 first reassures the poet-child that if he sleeps he will be loved; '*Dors: on t'aimera bien*' promises posthumous fame. The more abstract second part of the line, '*L'aimé c'est toujours* l'Autre…', is ambiguous, principally because of the gnomic resonance of 'l'Autre'. This suggests some sort of *Doppelgänger*, and exacerbates the self-division already suggested by the form of address. If read as a general instance of the particular statement 'on t'aimera bien' (with 'l'aimé' in apposition to 'tu', and 'Autre' describing the deceased 'tu'), it gives 'he who is other will always be loved'. If otherness is identified with death, it means 'the living always love someone who is dead and thus other'.[12] However, the phrasing betrays no indication of emphasis, and the capitalization and roman type of 'Autre' only accentuate the mystery by giving the term great weight, and underlining its otherness. Because of its epigrammatic quality it seems to stand alone, and if read as an autonomous proposition it could be a statement that 'loved ones are always alien to the self, no matter how much they are loved', or 'one always falls in love with someone who is different from oneself'. It could even give 'anyone I love is always in love with someone else', positing an unloved figure who sees women directing their attentions to other men, unrequited love being a recurrent theme of *Les Amours jaunes*.[13] 'L'Autre', whether it be life after death, or the beloved, triggers the poetic flight in line 4: 'Rêve: La plus aimée est toujours la plus loin…'. The generic love of line 3 gives rise to a more particularly sexual love, but the object of desire is unattainable. The connection between dreaming and love is ambiguous, for the two things are separated typographically by a colon, which cannot specify the causal links between them. The implicit suggestion is that the 'aimée' may be reached by dreaming, which is another incentive for the addressee to sleep. The poet moves from being the object of love in line 3 to being its subject in line 4. The object is masculine in line 3 and feminine in line 4, which gives a superficial impression of reciprocity, but the two loved ones are curiously detached. Aragon and Bonnin find

[12] 'L'Autre' in 'Le Poète contumace' (85) denotes death.
[13] 'L'Autre' in 'Le Fils de Lamartine et de Graziella' (58) denotes the rival lover.

both line 3 and line 4 ironic, and characterize the love as 'dérisoire', but it is difficult to pinpoint irony without considering its various possible directions.[14]

Neither speaker nor addressee is aware of the whole significance of what is said, and the resultant ironies are part of the poem's significance as a communication from poet to reader. Many of Corbière's poems stage self-aware personae, but in the 'Rondels pour après' the self-awareness is transferred to the poem itself. The poet is fragmented into an innocent child addressed by an observing self, the division recalling Baudelaire's observation: 'L'homme de génie a les nerfs solides; l'enfant les a faibles. Chez l'un, la raison a pris une place considérable; chez l'autre, la sensibilité occupe presque tout l'être. Mais le génie n'est que l'*enfance retrouvée* à volonté.'[15] The poems do not naively assume a childlike voice, but indirectly present a childlike perspective. Eliot sees the yoking of the child and the poet as a modern analogy to the metaphysical conceit whose 'satisfaction […] is due to the disparity between the idea and the image; so that what might be a cradle song for a baby becomes an elegy for a man of genius.'[16] The conceit suggests a fundamental division in the self. The use of the second person is a way of avoiding modes of confession or rhetorical bombast. Things are said in the second person which could not be said in the first person, and these poems could not be rewritten in the first person. They are not statements about the world, but a series of apostrophes, imperatives, and promises, which are a source of ambiguity because, as Jakobson points out, they 'are not liable to a truth test'.[17]

Another effect of the emphasis on the second person is to blur the temporality, because the imperatives refer variously to the past and the future, rather than telling a story which unfolds in a linear fashion. As the addressee is simultaneously a child and dead, he represents both the past and future of the poet, and these temporal uncertainties are reflected in the linguistic detail of the poem. The second quatrain continues the flight begun in line 4, using the fantastic expressions 'beau décrocheur d'étoiles' and 'chevaucheur de rayons' to show how the living perceive the dead.[18] 'Décrocher les étoiles' means to attain something impossible, and Corbière adapts the expression by turning it

[14] *Les Amours jaunes*, 439. [15] *Œuvres complètes*, ii. 690.
[16] *The Varieties of Metaphysical Poetry*, 219. [17] 'Linguistics and Poetics', 355.
[18] In Hugo's elegy for Juliette Drouet's young daughter, 'Claire P.', the girl's response to heavenly splendour is to ask 'Est-ce qu'il est permis de cueillir des étoiles?', which epitomizes her purity and innocence. *Les Contemplations, Œuvres poetiques*, ii. 698.

into a noun phrase and then creating a series of variations on the cosmic material—in the *rondels* there is a whole series of formulae modelled on this expression. The genitive structure is inherently ambiguous, for the relationship between the two nouns is not spelled out as it would be by a subject and predicate, because there is no tense. For the speaker to call the poet a 'décrocheur d'étoiles' does not specify whether he has unhooked stars, or whether he will do so, or whether he is capable of it, or even whether he is aware of himself as having this role. The ambiguity of the nominal structure allows all of these possibilities to coexist. It does not refer to recuperable events which have merely been described obliquely, but rather indeterminacy is built into the poem, such that illusion and reality are indistinguishable. The impossibility of these feats suggests death is a dreamlike fantasy. The grammatical form of the noun implies that the ephemeral activity of unhooking stars is undertaken repeatedly so that it has become a fixed identity, so instantaneity and permanence are woven into each other. This is a good example of the way in which the poem articulates neither the point of view of the speaker nor that of the addressee; the child seems unaware of the visionary powers attributed to him, and the ironic speaker is not describing the vision from the standpoint of a seer. The vocative orientation of the poem thus makes it possible to conjure images which exist independently of any subject.

The 'beau décrocheur d'étoiles' and the 'chevaucheur de rayons' are juxtaposed and linked by their parallel rhythm, the alliteration of [ʃ] and [ʀ], and the vowel harmony of [e], [ɔ], [œ] and [ə], [o], [œ]. Both these expressions about mastering light suggest a heavenwards ascent (often found in poems about death) as well as a Promethean power and attainment of distant objects. The previous quatrain suggested desire for a remote love object, and this one characterizes the poet as a stealer of distant objects, so one is inclined to associate the stars and rays with the desired feminine figure. Because of the ambiguity of the genitive phrases, it is uncertain whether such an object is attainable. These formulae, which stand out as memorable self-contained units, clash with the prosaic 'quand il fera bien noir' in line 6, which belongs in a more linear sort of narrative. The significance of this juxtaposition is not clear, since the temporal sequence is uncertain. Lines 5–6 might imply the poet will take on the fantastic role of 'décrocheur d'étoiles' when it gets dark, the little word 'bien' suggesting glee at the darkness. However, they could mean that he will not be recognized for the luminous pursuits of his lifetime until he is

dead. Darkness is at once a source of creative delight and sinister oblivion.

Lines 7 and 8 bring out the sinister side of darkness in a concentrated sequence which is impossible to read as a representation of the real world. However, the reader has become accustomed to this speaker's polyphony, and in this instance it is possible to pinpoint a specific intertext. The ceiling, hope, and spiders spinning webs inside the head all recall Baudelaire's 'Spleen' poem 'Quand le ciel bas et lourd', already identified as the source of imagery in 'La Pipe au poète'.[19] Baudelaire uses tangible images to suggest melancholy, so Corbière is borrowing an already weary representation of the world.[20] However, it is not only the intertextual status of these images that prevents them from constituting a real scene in 'Sonnet posthume', but also the way in which they generate each other through self-conscious play. 'L'ange du plafond' demotes the angel, a stock feature of poems about death, from a celestial to a domestic realm. However, it turns out to have been a metaphor for the 'maigre araignée ' which follows. The image is placed before the reality, so the imaginary angel takes precedence over the less exotic spider, emphasizing the strangeness of the juxtaposition. Like 'l'ange du plafond', the 'maigre araignée ' constitutes a strong independent unit, since the [ə] of 'maigre' is elided and the two words phonetically bound by the [ʀ] sound. The spider and the angel each have a life of their own, yet are both derived from the colloquial expression 'avoir une araignée dans le plafond', meaning 'to have a screw loose'.[21] The initial impression of the angel and spider as two separate protagonists is not obliterated by the recognition of this idiom, but persists and enhances the dreamlike atmosphere. The elision between 'maigre araignée ' and 'au soir' then relocates the spider in the proverb 'Araignée du matin, chagrin, araignée du soir, espoir', which imports more positive connotations, although the subsequent spinning of a web over the dead poet-child's empty forehead is more ominous. Rather than representing a scene, or being motivated purely by the Baudelaire intertext, the words generate each other so the poem has a strong internal logic, a strategy which characterizes the *rondels* as a whole.

[19] The relevant passage is cited on p. 124 above.

[20] Spiders are a familiar part of the décor of abandonment. Cf. Hugo, 'Les Mages': '[le doute] Suspend sa toile d'araignée | Au crâne, plafond du cachot'. *Œuvres poétiques*, ii. 785.

[21] Corbière also plays on this idiom in 'La Pipe au poète' (5–6), and in 'Le Poète contumace' (93–4), reducing the poet's visionary powers to a less noble derangement.

Line 9, 'Museleur de voilette! un baiser sous le voile', combines a number of devices already discussed to create an effect of evocative density. It echoes the desiring movement of line 4, but rather than presupposing the unattainability of the love object, it suggests the sensuous particularity of an amorous encounter. The nominal structure of 'Museleur de voilette' suggests a pursuit as impossible as the unhooking of stars, for the idea of muzzling a hat-veil is paradoxical. Syntactically it is ambiguous, as the two juxtaposed items have an equivalent force, so the kiss seems to be an object in its own right rather than an event requiring two human agents. The 'baiser sous le voile' is mysterious and yet referred to as if it were a known category of kiss. Indeed, kissing through a veil is a cliché for the combination of innocence and eroticism which characterizes the first overtures to a lover; Hugo describes tentative compliments as 'quelque chose comme le baiser à travers le voile',[22] and the image is used to titillating effect by Parnassians, in lines such as Coppée's 'O les premiers baisers à travers la voilette!'[23] By changing the adverb from 'à travers' to 'sous', Corbière defamiliarizes the expression and makes the kiss an object instead of an action. The pleasurable intimations are underlined by the formal harmonies of the line; its strong binary structure is reinforced by its rhythm; 'voilette' echoes 'voile', and 'museleur' and 'baiser' are linked by the [z] and their association with the mouth. However, it is also macabre, for 'voile' suggests a shroud. The repetition of terms for veil marks the centre of a cluster of terms associated with cloth. 'Voile' rhymes with 'toile' and thus retrospectively brings out the double meaning of the latter, which can mean cloth or canvas painting as well as web. The spiders' spinning has produced the delicate feminine 'voilette', which is then modulated into the less specific 'voile', investing the veil with a darker significance as it suggests a shroud, this sense being subsequently reinforced by its rhyme with 'poêle'. Associations of sex, death, and religion all coincide in the potent sign of the veil. The speaker is teasing, for he suggests that physical pleasure is very close, yet still an impossibility, and there is a risk that there is nothing behind the veil. Everything points to this meeting being illusory: the logical impossibility of muzzling a veil, the grammatical uncertainty over whether muzzling is undertaken, and the speaker's teasing vacillation between offering and retracting. The

[22] *Les Misérables*, in *Romans*, ii. 390.

[23] Coppée, *Intimités*, II, in *Œuvres de François Coppée: Poésies 1864–1869* (Paris: Lemerre, 1870), 96.

veil itself is equivocal: it both conceals and reveals, it is a barrier yet transparent. However, the dreams are a source of delight, as though their beauty resides in their very impossibility; as Stendhal said: 'Le Beau n'est que la promesse du bonheur'.[24]

The kiss is not syntactically anchored until the next line, which defines it as awaiting the addressee, in yet another promise of pleasure. The tantalizing sense of 't'attend' is reinforced by the enjambement. This suspense is amplified by the alluring qualification 'on ne sait où', which contradicts the previous assurance that the kiss would be bestowed 'sous le voile', and underlines that this location was not to be read mimetically as a literal site. Having promised the kiss, the speaker reveals it cannot be pinpointed, arousing the suspicion that it may be illusory. 'Ferme les yeux pour voir' continues this teasing. The paradoxical notion of blindness permitting inward vision is an ancient literary topos, and has received similarly formulaic expression in Joubert's 'Ferme les yeux et tu verras'.[25] Corbière's injunction has a serious *voyant* note, yet it is like a child's game. Line 11 adds to the rewards awaiting the deceased, with 'premiers honneurs' playing on the expression *derniers honneurs*, meaning the last tribute at a funeral, and again subverting the opposition of beginnings and endings. The *rondels* are concerned with the reputation of a poet who will only be appreciated after his death, so his funeral marks the beginning of this posthumous fame, and constitutes the first recognition as well as the last rites. The injunction 'Ris' at once asks the child to mock the ritual and to rejoice that he is being celebrated. These honours are identified with the kiss since both are awaiting the poet, and a sense of ritual is thus superimposed on the kiss. The 'poêle' is the cloth covering the coffin during the funeral, and also a white veil held over the heads of a couple during a Catholic marriage ceremony. It functions as what Riffaterre would call a dual sign,[26] literally being part of the funereal décor, but also signifying a wedding. The themes of love and death are brought together in a marriage with death.

The last tercet treats the notion of honouring with more acerbic irony. It mocks the décor of ritual and negates the value of spiritual imagery, for the accessories are presented as mere trinkets, and the cosmic atmosphere is achieved rather through the evocative use of

[24] Stendhal, *De l'amour*, ed. Henri Martineau (Paris: Garnier, 1959), 40.
[25] Joseph Joubert, *Pensées*, ed. Paul de Raynal (Paris: Didier, 1864), ii. 26.
[26] *Semiotics of Poetry*, 86.

language. It implies that recognition of the poet will not be genuine, by playing on the expression *donner des coups d'encensoir*, meaning to praise someone in a way which is exaggerated or actually insults them.[27] Humour results from the figurative expression being taken at face value, so the sexton literally swings his censer at the poet's nose. The interpolation of 'bon' lends the line the solid particularity of an individual's gesture, rather than it being purely a figurative expression. There is a childlike naivety in 'bon' and the addition of this little word gives the whole phrase a particular intonation. It is a qualification used to indicate an unimportant action undertaken carefully, and even has a slightly patronizing air, as if addressed to a child. The implication of carefree thoroughness is ironic here, since the act is simultaneously defamatory or destructive, having both a figurative and a literal meaning. The intonation is light-hearted, but there is bitterness at the lack of appreciation of the poet. This irony continues in lines 13 and 14; for 'doux fumet' is placed in apposition to the censer. This underlines the sexton's thoughtlessness, showing that he perceives it as the source of pleasant odours rather than as an implement of destruction. His fleshy nose is well adapted to appreciating this odour, but from the perspective of the poet this feature only adds insult to injury. The assonance on [ɛ̃] gives the 'sacristain très-bien' a strong intonational force, which suggests an evaluative accent. However, it is hard to tell if this is an ironic speaker quoting an approving comment made by a smug bourgeois, or a playfully taunting childish voice. The poem ends with the sexton's snuffer which literally suggests an extinction of light, and thus life. Its figurative meaning of a killjoy aligns him with the bourgeois figures throughout the *rondels* who do not understand the poet.

It is tempting to construct a story to explain the rhetorical situation of the dialogue with the self, and to interpret the poems as the expression of a self-aware adult addressing the fantastic child in himself, or as the childlike poet projecting a motherly voice which could comfort him, yet making it ironic in the knowledge that he is inconsolable. However, the poem suggests a plurality of such possibilities rather than deciding on any single one, and evokes simultaneity rather than unfolding a linear narrative. It seems to have made a journey from the domestic setting of the bedroom to the finality of the coffin. There is an apparently linear sequence, and the movement through 'Dors', 'Rêve', and 'Ris' in the

[27] This expression was also played on by Hugo in the Prologue to *L'Année terrible*: 'Ce n'est pas d'encensoirs que le sphinx est camus' (30), *Œuvres poetiques*, iii. 284.

accented monosyllables at the beginning of the lines suggests some sort of progression. However, the drama is in the language rather than in any sort of plot, and the poem constantly makes connections between moments which one would normally expect to be at opposite ends of a linear narrative, such as childhood and death. Past, present, and future are simultaneously present. The poem may ostensibly have progressed from a child's bed to the coffin, but its internal patterns have suggested an identity between these things, and thus the journey has in truth been a circular one. The fluctuation between offering and refusing love means that the poem vacillates between possibility and impossibility without attaining any goal. The emphasis on the vocative sets the pattern for the 'Rondels' sequence as a whole. The non-linear structure of 'Sonnet posthume' prefigures the form of the *rondels* which follow it. It even aspires towards their form in specific details: the anaphoric repetition of 'Dors' anticipates their circularity, and the expected contrast between quatrains and tercets is undercut by the use of only two rhymes in lines 5–14. This dissolution is reinforced by the [wa] sound common to both masculine and feminine rhymes—the all-pervasive childlike babbling inscribes the theme of the infant at the phonetic level.

'RONDEL': EVOCATION

Il fait noir, enfant, voleur d'étincelles!
Il n'est plus de nuits, il n'est plus de jours.
Dors… en attendant venir toutes celles
Qui disaient : Jamais! Qui disaient : Toujours!

Entends-tu leurs pas?… Ils ne sont pas lourds:
Oh! les pieds légers! — l'Amour a des ailes…
Il fait noir, enfant, voleur d'étincelles!

Entends-tu leurs voix?… Les caveaux sont sourds.
Dors : Il pèse peu, ton faix d'immortelles;
Ils ne viendront plus, tes amis les ours,
Jeter leur pavé sur tes demoiselles…
Il fait noir, enfant, voleur d'étincelles!

The second poem in the sequence slots the system of address established in 'Sonnet posthume' into the *rondel* form, which is used to virtuoso effect. The songlike associations of this fixed form enable Corbière to indulge in sonorous evocations whilst avoiding Romantic grandiloquence. The *rondel* is the form of rondeau current before 1500, and

Corbière plays on its archaic associations without ever descending into pastiche. The impact of the *rondel* stems from its combination of simplicity and sophistication, as recognized by Banville, who revived it for the nineteenth century.[28] Corbière lengthens the line from the usual light octosyllables to more reflective decasyllables, but retains associations with the 'chanson' tradition by consistently using a strong 5/5 binary structure, which is less elevated than the more usual 4/6 pattern. Banville points out that the *rondel*'s apparent simplicity is achieved by skilful crafting: 'tout l'art consiste à ce que le refrain soit ramené sans effort, gaiement, naturellement, et chaque fois de façon à former comme un trait nouveau, mettant en lumière un nouvel aspect de la même idée.'[29] Corbière modifies the classical thirteen-line structure of the *rondel* as used by Charles d'Orléans (*A B b a a b A B a b b a A*—capitals indicating refrain lines). He varies the order of the rhymes, and in the second stanza repeats only the first line of the refrain (turning the *a b A B* quatrain into an *a b A* tercet), thereby reducing his *rondels* to twelve lines.[30] This minimizes the effect of contrived wit which often results from the repetition of two lines, and opens up the *rondel* for more suggestive effects. Repeating the *A* line alone has the advantage of appearing less mechanical, whilst still creating a strong internal pattern. Corbière also maximizes the poetic potential of the form's restriction to two rhymes. The poems are constantly recycling elements of themselves, and these repetitions make for circularity. Repetition is the basis of poetry, as Gerard Manley Hopkins emphasizes in his succinct definition of verse as 'speech wholly or partially repeating the same figure of sound'.[31] This principle is carried to extremes in the *rondel* form. The use of only two rhymes makes the rhyme axis extremely prominent, suggesting vertical correspondences which cut across the horizontal axis of the syntax. The refrain lines take on different meanings when they appear in different contexts, which makes for complexity. In addition to the whole lines and rhymes determined by the fixed form, Corbière repeats grammatical

[28] 'Chacun d'eux forme un tout rhythmique, complet et parfait, et en même temps ils ont la grâce naive et comme inconsciente des créations qu'ont faites les époques primitives', Théodore de Banville, *Petit Traité de poésie française* (Paris: Fasquelle, 1899), 185.

[29] Ibid. 187.

[30] Charles d'Orléans's late rondels repeat only the *A* line and thus have only 12 lines (as noted by John Fox in *The Lyric Poetry of Charles d'Orléans* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969), 119–20) but Corbière seems to be the only successor to experiment with this variation.

[31] Quoted by Jakobson in 'Linguistics and Poetics', 358–9.

structures and single words to create dense internal patterns. Repetition is a way of suggesting meaning through formal organization, rather than by discursively explaining connections between things, and this reading of 'Rondel' focuses on its use of rhythm, repetition, and rhyme to produce evocative effect.

'Rondel' echoes the alternation of promise and denial established in 'Sonnet posthume' and plays on the two-rhyme form to set up a series of oppositions. The oscillation between the positive and the negative is mirrored by the antithesis of lightness and heaviness. This opposition is enacted in the rhyme axis, as pointed out by Jean-Pierre Richard, for the feminine rhymes on [ɛlə] are euphoric terms, whereas the masculine ones on [ur] are negative.[32] Richard brings out the tension between the lulling reassurance of the formal structures and the disturbing implications of the sense, referring to the Freudian model of dreamwork to argue that this disjunction is part of the libidinal drama staged by the poem. He usefully foregrounds the sexual dimension of the text, but this eroticism needs to be considered as part of the complex whole.

The refrain, 'Il fait noir, enfant, voleur d'étincelles!', is particularly dense and suggestive, for it combines an ambiguous nominal structure with fragmented syntax, and each component is already loaded with meaning acquired in 'Sonnet posthume'. 'Il fait noir' echoes 'éteignoir', the final word of that poem, and the child is now a 'voleur d'étincelles', a Prometheus. His previous incarnation, as a 'décrocheur d'étoiles', suggested that he could confidently reach for great things, but as a 'voleur d'étincelles' he becomes a more active figure of revolt instead of a mere dreamer. Phonetically 'il fait noir' takes up the [war] sound, and lexically continues the theme of darkness. The initial impact is therefore that '*Rondel*' is describing what follows use of the snuffer. 'Il fait noir' also recalls the prediction made in 'Sonnet posthume': 'Dors: on t'appellera beau décrocheur d'étoiles! | Chevaucheur de rayons!… quand il fera bien noir'. If the sonnet implies that the poet will exercise his fantastic talent once darkness falls, the 'il fait noir' of 'Rondel' must herald the beginning of this joyful pursuit; but if the sonnet means that the poet's facility with light will only be recognized after his death, it is a more negative opening. The phrase has the innocence of an everyday observation, but darkness more abstractly suggests death. It has a chiastic structure, for the two terms referring to the addressee are flanked by two referring to dark and light. 'Noir' and 'étincelles' thus sketch a primal

[32] *Microlectures II*, 21–38.

opposition, but the line does not actively propose an antithesis. 'Il fait noir' looks like a mere preliminary, but as the line turns on its tail and offers no further verb, it emerges that it had played an instrumental role. The circular structure of the refrain makes it a microcosm of the global structures of the 'Rondels pour après'.

In the refrain the speaker indicates to the child the existence of a state of darkness of unspecified duration, which could be figurative or literal, and addresses him as a stealer of sparks, which identifies no particular instance of theft, so its temporality is uncertain. The imagery of dark and light is integral to the tradition of representing death, and the coexistence of opposites here suggests that death is simultaneously the obscure unknown and an illumination of new possibilities. The line is so condensed that there is nothing to suggest a tone of voice; it could equally be a promise, a challenge, or a threat. The sense may be a joyful 'now it is dark/you are dead, so you can start stealing sparks', or it may be a more sombre 'you were a stealer of sparks but now it is dark/you are dead, so that is over', or it may be a reproachful 'it is dark because you stole the sparks'. It may mean something like 'as a poet you can conjure sparks out of the darkness of existence', which is how Angelet reads it.[33] It could also give 'because you stole the sparks you have been punished with darkness', which is how Jean-Pierre Richard interprets it.[34] For Richard, the darkness of 'il fait noir' is equivalent to blindness, and is a punishment for stealing sparks, which he interprets as a past sexual transgression. However, this blindness is quite a leap from the injunction 'ferme les yeux pour voir' in 'Sonnet posthume', which had promised that closing one's eyes would bring pleasure. Richard recognizes the ambiguity of 'il fait noir' at the level of the disparity between form and content, pointing out the tension between its reassuring 3/2/2/3 rhythm and its negative message. He suggests that the contradictory aspects of the line correspond to two different scenes superimposed on each other; an earlier scene of sexual transgression and the resulting scene of punishment. This may be one of the implications of the line, but Corbière has built indeterminate temporality into the line such that it is impossible to recuperate a narrative from behind it. The phrase 'voleur d'étincelles' itself fuses ephemerality and permanence, by referring to a transient act as an enduring condition. It does not specify whether he has stolen sparks, or whether he will do so, or whether he is capable of

[33] *La Poétique de Tristan Corbière*, 70. [34] *Microlectures II*, 27.

it. As a result, the self is constituted by, or at least described in terms of, a fleeting event or passing fantasy.

Line 2 translates the opposition of dark and light into temporal terms. The negation of night and day undermines both conventional time divisions and the opposition of dark and light. The rest of the quatrain introduces the possibility of visitors, returning to the theme of love initiated in 'Sonnet posthume'. The visitors are represented in minimal terms, and the reader's anticipation of a fuller description enacts the desiring movement of the poet-child. The 'voleur d'étincelles' is told to wait for the visitors denoted by the pronoun 'celles', which technically refers forward to line 4 rather than back to any noun in the foregoing syntax. However, 'celles' has an antecedent in the rhyme 'étincelles', which establishes an equivalence between light and femininity. Given that the poet is a stealer of sparks, and feminine visitors are equated with sparks, it is suggested that the poet desires these beings. In line 4 the feminine visitors are defined by their past responses to the poet, alternately to reject him with 'Jamais', and to make promises with 'Toujours'. Like line 2, it has a strong binary structure, underlined by the 3/2/3/2 rhythm. The quatrain began with an opposition of light and dark, and shifted towards one of temporality with 'nuit' and 'jour', which linked the two sense-systems of chiaroscuro and time, but the 'Jamais'/'Toujours' opposition falls squarely within the latter. Richard points out that the opposition also echoes the [ɛ] and [ʊʀ] sounds of the rhymes.[35] However, although 'jamais' belongs phonetically with the euphoric terms, its meaning here is negative. Neither disappointment nor hope is sustained for long, but each seems already to inhabit the other. The teasing oscillation between consolation and threat is playful, reflecting the light-hearted attitude of the girls. The poem suggests how the victim's frustration is provoked, by staging the carelessness of those who played upon his desire. In the context of an emotional attachment, 'Jamais' and 'Toujours' are loaded terms, so to say them in one breath is to devalue both, implying that they were uttered thoughtlessly by the girls. There is nonetheless a tension between this devaluation and the capitalization of 'Jamais' and 'Toujours', which invests the words with importance. The poet reports the girls' answers in a stylized form, summarizing the two possible extremes in archetypal terms, showing simultaneously that the responses were of little consequence to his tormentors, but had a deep significance for him as victim. 'Jamais' and

[35] Ibid. 30.

'toujours' look like opposites, but are ambiguous when quoted out of context like this, for they could also both be expressions of commitment taken from formulae along the lines of 'I shall *never* forget you', 'I shall *always* love you'.

Lines 3–4 evoke memory and anticipation simultaneously: the visitation is awaited, yet the visitors are defined in terms of what they used to say. The substance of what they said also pertains to temporality ('Jamais', 'Toujours'), and since they spoke in terms of eternity, what they said long ago has implications for the future. As Richard summarizes it, line 3 is an 'anticipation de souvenirs' and line 4 a 'souvenir d'anticipations'.[36] Experience is not idealized, for frustration is insinuated by this perpetual anticipation of things which never materialize. If 'Sonnet posthume' articulates promises to the poet, 'Rondel' reminds the poet of past promises which were not fulfilled. The past is hinted at indirectly in these lines, as though it cannot be accessed in itself but its return is inevitable. The reader cannot recuperate a linear sequence of events from this quatrain, for its message is that past, present, and future are deeply imbricated in each other.

The tercet gives these elusive feminine creatures some contours, initially by suggesting their audibility, underlined by the dense sound patterning. By asking if the addressee can hear them and then explaining why he cannot, the speaker again arouses the desire of the poet, only to frustrate it immediately. The question 'Entends-tu leurs pas?' gives a sense of immediacy, suggesting for once that the object of desire is close at hand. Lightness is a source of both pleasure and pain; it makes these creatures sensuously appealing, yet also renders them inaccessible. 'L'Amour a des ailes', which recalls 'la plus aimée est toujours la plus loin' from 'Sonnet posthume', is at once a description of a mythological winged god and a rather bitter comment on the fickleness of love. In contrast to the uncertainty of the quatrain, the tercet evokes more tangible features, such as feet or wings, although these are the parts which permit flight, which emphasizes the volatile nature of these creatures. The duplicity of love is underlined by the avoidance of the obvious rhyme of 'Amour' with 'toujours'. Although 'Amour' belongs phonetically in the 'heavy' rhyme axis, the poem spells out its lightness with 'l'Amour a des ailes'. The theme of lightness is reflected in the levity of the language; line 5 puns on 'pas', using it once to mean 'step' and once as a negative particle. The positive and

[36] *Microlectures II*, 29.

the negative are closely intertwined, for the negative particle is caught up in the sound patterning of [p] which links the positive terms of 'pas' and 'pieds'.

By the time the refrain is repeated at the end of the tercet, it is clear that the expression 'voleur d'étincelles' reflects the poet's desire to attain these feminine visitors, but that it is a vain hope. In Corbière's twelve-line version of the *rondel* form, only the *A* line of the refrain is repeated, and the absence of the expected *B* line conveys a sense of loss, which is doubled in this instance since the missing *B* line 'Il n'est plus de nuits, il n'est plus de jours' itself expressed absence. Corbière's omission of the *B* line at this point in the *rondel* alters the dynamic of the form. In the traditional model, when two lines are repeated and then finally one only, attention is focused on the end, as Clive Scott points out: the 'rondel ends on a climactically, or anticlimactically, abbreviated version of the refrain, insistently repeating the *a* rhyme'.[37] The resonance of the *A* line is increased when the *B* line is omitted; the effect may be either of wit or expansive suggestivity.[38] By omitting the *B* line early, Corbière instigates this resonance early in the poem. He also amplifies another tendency identified by Clive Scott as being latent in the *rondel* form: 'the *B* line must be gradually discarded; it is moved from a position where it founds a stanza, to a position, in the second quatrain, where it completes a stanza, to a perfect dispensability in the finale.'[39] Corbière accelerates this process by erasing the *B* line at the first opportunity, allowing it to hover for longer as a ghostly presence. By introducing this premature loss and reducing the purely conventional witty repetitions, whilst intensifying repetitions at other levels, Corbière frees the fixed form for the serious issues of life and death.

In the quintil the addressee continues to play a passive role, being acted upon by a range of others: 'ton faix d'immortelles', 'tes amis les ours', and 'tes demoiselles'. Line 9 is oxymoronic, for 'faix' denotes a heavy burden, yet the flowers are qualified as light. The 'immortelles' thus embody a new version of the opposition of light and heaviness, and a number of elements converge on this term. The clustering of [p] sounds in 'pèse peu' recalls the [p] sounds associated with the light-footed girls of lines 5–6, and the flowers are thus linked phonetically

[37] Clive Scott, *The Poetics of French Verse: Studies in Reading* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), 109.

[38] 'The final line should conjure the absent *B* line, which in turn should have "l'expansion des choses infinies", ibid. 121.

[39] Ibid. 122.

as well as through the theme of lightness to the girls. They connote both life and death, and are specifically qualified as light, which is in turn inextricably bound up with love. The flowers belong by their rhyme to the light, feminine pole of the poem, bringing out the double meaning of 'immortelles', which could denote flowers or goddesses. As flowers, the 'immortelles' mediate between life, because they are long-lasting, and death, because they are often laid on graves. As goddesses, they echo the feminine visitors of the tercet and associate femininity with immortality. The polysemy of 'immortelle' permits an incidental item of decor to insinuate the abstract theme of immortality, which is central to the *rondels*; they evoke the afterlife, the memory of the poet, the ephemerality of love, and the persistence of the past into the future.

The bears introduced in line 10 are first defined as 'amis', as though they are nursery images being used to comfort the child, but, in a typical twist, the context rapidly gives them a negative value. The [uʀ] rhyme links them with the heavy negative terms and contrasts them to the feminine visitors. *Ours* also had the pejorative sense of an unpublished work in the nineteenth century, and since *pavé* can denote a large book, the social reality of writing is hinted at. In lines 10–11 the speaker denies danger and thereby indirectly suggests its possibility, again using a reassuring tone to say something unsettling. This is an intertextual reference to the La Fontaine fable 'L'Ours et l'amateur des jardins', in which a bear shows his affection for a man by swatting flies away from his face when he is asleep. He becomes incensed when one lands on the man's nose, throws a 'pavé' at the insect, and inadvertently kills his friend, the moral being that an ignorant friend is more dangerous than a wise enemy. Corbière charges the La Fontaine scenario with great density of meaning by replacing *mouches* with *demoiselles*, which signifies both dragonflies and young ladies. The latter had already been characterized as liable to take flight, and Corbière plays on the polysemy of *demoiselle* to emphasize their volatility. Two sense-systems coincide in 'demoiselles', as in 'immortelles', for the word simultaneously denotes items from the natural world and human girls. This recombination of elements already established in the preceding text is foregrounded phonetically, for 'demoiselles' combines the [wa] sound from the rhymes of 'Sonnet posthume' with the [ɛlə] rhyme from this poem. The pain caused by the inaccessibility of these damsels is exorcised by the rhymes which

constantly return them. The themes of violence and love had already been combined in 'Sonnet posthume', as the anticipation of a kiss was interrupted by the threat of a broken nose. The La Fontaine intertext tells us that the bear is concerned for the poet, yet causes suffering, and so it complements the girls who caused suffering but were unconcerned.

In the *rondel* form, the line that opened the poem also closes it, so beginnings and endings are collapsed on to each other, and the repetitions blur temporality. Corbière's opening line suggested fantastic flight and indeterminate temporality, and as the line persistently returns into the same form without materializing into anything more specific, it becomes clear that it is inherently unreal. The final refrain therefore underlines the absence of the feminine figures. The non-appearance of ethereal figures who might alleviate the poet's suffering recalls Baudelaire's 'L'Irréparable', in which the speaker wishes that real life had its equivalent to the 'Être aux ailes de gaze': the fairy who vanquishes evil at the end of a pantomine (Corbière's *jamais* and *toujours* also nod towards the same stanza of that poem). Just as Baudelaire uses a banal theatrical trick to explore existential anguish, Corbière concocts his own blend of the trivial and the profound.

'DO, L'ENFANT, DO': DISLOCATION

> Buona vespre! *Dors : Ton bout de cierge…*
> *On l'a posé là, puis on est parti.*
> *C'est le chandelier de ton lit d'auberge*
> *Tu n'auras pas peur seul, pauvre petit?…*
>
> *Du fesse-cahier ne crains plus la verge.*
> *Va!… De t'éveiller point n'est si hardi*
> Buona sera! *Dors : Ton bout de cierge…*
>
> *Est mort. — Il n'est plus, ici, de concierge.*
> *Seuls, le vent du nord, le vent du midi*
> *Viendront balancer un fil-de-la-Vierge…*
>
> *Chut! Pour les pieds-plats, ton sol est maudit.*
> *— Buona notte! Dors : ton bout de cierge…*

Having demonstrated his mastery of the musical potential of the form in 'Rondel', Corbière proceeds to reintroduce dissonance and

fragmentation in this third poem. It is the most difficult *rondel* to link to a single train of thought, and its desolate tone sits ill with the received view of the *rondels* being a celebration of harmony finally attained. Aragon and Bonnin rightly point out that 'la note dominante est le manque d'amour, la solitude'.[40] However, it is not merely a vague evocation of loneliness, but an intricate interweaving of the motifs which run through the *rondels*.

The direct allusion to the lullaby 'Do, do, l'enfant, do' is a natural step, given that the previous poems have instructed the child to sleep, and that the *rondel* is an inherently song-like form. However, in Corbière's 'Do, l'enfant, do' the naive form is shot through with the macabre. It is striking that a poem parading as a soothing lullaby should be structured around such a dislocated refrain, which has an unsettling trochaic rhythm if read with Italian pronunciation. The accented monosyllable 'dors' proves more unsettling when interpolated between two disconnected elements than when it initiates a line, as it had previously done. It seems to have been pushed to the right by the greeting 'buona vespre' which squats at the line-initial position. The roman font and Italian language mark it out as an intruder into the domestic intimacy, but it is actually a stylized version of 'bonnes vêpres', an archaic or regional equivalent of 'bonsoir'. This fragment of living social discourse is a hybrid of the quotidian and the literary. 'Bonsoir' could equally be a greeting or a farewell, and 'dire bonsoir' can be a euphemism for dying.

The refrain is syntactically linked to neighbouring lines, so not only does it appear in a different light each time, but its grammatical role changes. Although its literal meaning is given by its context in each instance, it nonetheless draws attention to itself as an autonomous entity, suggesting that multiple possibilities are latent in this particular combination of words. The relationship between 'Dors' and 'ton bout de cierge' is not immediately obvious. The candle is only loosely anchored in this fragmented line, so a range of associations suggest themselves. It alludes to the custom of the *veillée funèbre*, which involves burning candles by the body of the deceased. It also reworks the traditional topos of the candle as an image for the passing of time, and hence mortality. The ironically truncated 'bout de cierge' simultaneously undercuts the gravity of the conventional image and draws on the weight lent by its tradition. He evokes the candle as a humble object, rather than

[40] *Les Amours jaunes*, 443.

as a portentous symbol in the style of Hugo's 'Maintenant que mon temps décroît comme un flambeau'.[41] 'Cierge' has specifically religious connotations, which are undercut by the prosaic 'bout de'. The more usual expression, 'bout de chandelle', is hovering behind it, particularly as 'chandelle' would echo the rhymes of the previous *rondel*. 'Chandelle' is also a slang expression for the penis, so the recurrent theme of sexuality is latent here.

Line 2 has a childlike simplicity, with the rhythm reinforcing the binary syntactic pattern, yet 'là' and 'on' are peculiarly unspecific. It ostensibly reassures the poet that he has been left with a night-light, yet is telling him that he has been abandoned, without specifying whether the speaker or a third party is responsible. The 'bout de cierge' suggests both abandonment and the possibility that it can be left behind as it is no longer needed—it is simultaneously positive and negative. In line 3 the speaker appears to voice sympathy by calling the child a 'pauvre petit', and expressing awareness that he might be lonely, yet then withdraws and makes any response impossible. The speaker indirectly suggests the loneliness of the poet by inhabiting the pitying voice of a third party, to show that the pity is superficial.

Lines 2–3 evoke the abandonment of the poet, and sound patterning on [p] links dysphoric terms: 'pas', 'peur', and 'pauvre' are inherently negative, and 'posé' and 'parti' are here associated with abandonment. The pattern is reinforced by 'puis' and 'petit', and builds up to a particular intensity in the second line. Here, the assonance of the adjacent monosyllabic words 'peur' and 'seul' further emphasizes the connection between these unpleasant sensations. It is also reinforced by the rhythm; a number of accents are accumulated very close to each other on these important words. Adjacent syllables are accented in 'seul' and 'pauvre', and the reader is forced to pause, as this is difficult to articulate. It is uncertain whether both 'peur' and 'seul' should be stressed, as three accented syllables in succession would bring the line close to rhythmical breakdown, but syntactically it is an unusual instance. When reading this line, one is inclined to emphasize 'peur', expecting it to be the end of the phrase and positioned before the caesura, but the qualification which follows, 'seul', attracts a stronger accent as the syntax is unexpectedly extended beyond the caesura. The word 'seul' puts 'peur' in the shade, and draws more attention to itself, as though loneliness is yet more powerful than fear. The lexical movement of the line is to

[41] 'Paroles sur la dune', *Les Contemplations*, *Œuvres poétiques*, ii. 695.

assert unhappiness by pretending to deny it, and the sound patterning inscribes this despair by foregrounding the dysphoric elements.

This poem relies to a considerable extent on the power of juxtaposition to create meaning; the first two lines describe the abandonment of the candle-end, and the third the lonely poet, indirectly suggesting an equivalence between candle and poet. 'Bout de' suggests a small remnant of a candle, and 'pauvre petit' suggests a small child. In the first line there is a metonymic connection between candle and poet; the object is assigned to the person by the pronoun 'ton', but the relationship becomes more metaphorical as the quatrain progresses, and the candle-end emerges as an emblem for the poet. The euphemistic tendency persists in this reluctance to state directly that the child is dead, these qualities being instead projected onto the candle-end, and also extends to the veiled references to sexuality. The 'bout de cierge' is a versatile image, being simultaneously a global metaphor for the poet, an object in his surroundings, and a phallic symbol.

Line 4, 'C'est le chandelier de ton lit d'auberge', sees a shift in terminology: the candle-end is replaced by a candlestick. This member of the candle paradigm is not yet burnt out, connotes festivity, and has been removed from the realm of life, the 'lit d'auberge', to the unspoken bed of the grave. This suggests a parallel between the literal and the figurative bed, just as in 'Sonnet posthume' the bed was simultaneously a final resting place, a place to sleep, and the potential scene of lovemaking. The bed in 'Do, l'enfant, do' also has sexual associations, given the figurative meaning of 'chandelier', namely a fourth party exploited by an adulterous woman. The 'chandelier' is a younger man whose affections she openly encourages, in order to divert her husband's suspicion from the real affair which she is conducting with someone else, as in Musset's play *Le Chandelier*.[42] This connotation indirectly alludes to the theme of love, specifically the triangle in line 1 of 'Sonnet posthume'. The 'auberge' represents security,[43] just as the child's bed had done, and in death he is distanced from both of these havens. The speaker has a cosy bedside tone, yet indirectly points out that the child is far from such safety.

The immediate impression given by the tercet is of radical discontinuity with the quatrain. It repeats the strategy of denying the possibility

[42] Revived in Paris in 1872.

[43] Baudelaire frequently uses the image of the 'auberge' as refuge, notably in 'L'Irréparable': 'L'Espérance qui brille aux carreaux de l'Auberge'.

of danger, only to suggests its possibility, by introducing the violently authoritarian 'fesse-cahier'. In the same mould as 'gratte-papier', 'fesse-cahier' is literally an archaic derogatory term for a clerk, derived from the expression 'fesser le cahier', meaning 'to write a lot', and means 'someone who writes in great haste'. The 'fesse-cahier' is an autonomous figure, an anti-Muse, a threatening authority brandishing a stick to force the poet to write. However, like the candle-end, it embodies an aspect of the poet, since writing is as much a part of poetry as is visionary inspiration. 'Du fesse-cahier ne crains plus la verge' suggests that in the afterlife poetic flight can be achieved without the painful work of writing. 'Fesser' means both to smack and to do something quickly. Corbière exploits both meanings, for not only is the 'fesse-cahier' someone who writes fast, but the 'verge' is literally figured in this line. 'Verge' has its own connotations which feed the main currents of the poem. Like 'fesser', 'verge' is often used in expressions about disciplining children, a connotation appropriate to the theme of the child in the *rondels*, and also means penis, echoing the double meaning of 'chandelle'. Sexuality is alluded to through wordplay, and is less idealized than the delicate insinuations of desire in 'Rondel'. The refrain in the tercet is modified to 'buona sera', and the Italian this time has more particular connotations. As 'buona sera' follows the dismissal 'va' it recalls the well-known scene from Rossini's *Il Barbiere di Siviglia* in which the lovers sing 'buona sera' to send an unwanted third party to bed. This has obvious parallels with the scenario of Corbière's child being dispatched to its resting place. The operatic allusion follows snatches of popular songs and lullabies, reminding us of the *rondel*'s origin as a sung form and producing a texture which has something in common with Rimbaud's aesthetic as summarized in *Une Saison en Enfer*: 'J'aimais [les] contes de fées, petits livres d'enfance, opéras vieux, refrains niais, rhythmes naïfs.'[44]

The syntax runs on between the tercet and the quintil, so 'ton bout de cierge' is given the abrupt predicate 'est mort'. This is an immense textual shock, as a whole range of Corbière's signifying techniques are mobilized simultaneously. First, he is playing on the metaphorical value of the candle-end: its close link to the poet-child means that it refers to the death of the addressee. The phonetic parallel between 'mort' and 'dors' reinforces the equivalence between death and sleep which has been a subtext. Secondly, the startling lexical directness of 'est mort' is emphasized through the formal havoc wrought by the

[44] 'Délires', i, 'Alchimie du Verbe', *Œuvres*, 228.

enjambement. Thirdly, the surprise is underlined by our expectation that a conventional *rondel* would repeat the first two lines of the quatrain at this point. We would expect it to continue 'On l'a posé là, puis on est parti'. As in 'Rondel', a statement of absence and loss is discarded at the first repetition of the refrain. Fourthly, 'Ton bout de cierge | est mort' is an intertextual reference to 'Ma chandelle est morte' in 'Au clair de la lune', so the 'chandelle' maintains its unverbalized presence in the text, and the sexual overtones of 'Au clair de la lune' are echoed in the Corbière poem. Alluding to the popular song also mobilizes a latent connection between the candle-end and the writing implement. 'Au clair de la lune' associates the pen and the candle, writing and fire:

> Prête-moi ta plume
> Pour écrire un mot.
> Ma chandelle est morte
> Je n'ai plus de feu.

Corbiere suppresses the metonymic links in order to combine these elements at a metaphorical level. The 'bout de cierge' in 'Do, l'enfant, do' is a play on 'bout de chandelle', but the commonplace expression 'bout de crayon' is also hovering behind it.[45] The implied verbal phrase 'Fesser le cahier' evokes violent contact with paper, and if 'fesser' is an image for writing, the 'verge' is thus equivalent to a pen. The candle and writing are also associated by formal parallels: the word 'fesse-cahier' echoes the 'chandelier', for they both occur at the same position in consecutive lines, have the same rhythm, and both contain the [j] sound followed by the [e] sound which is accented on the fifth syllable. The [j] sound is also found in 'cierge', again linking a candle word. These sounds stand out, because they pervade the poem in a more generalized sound pattern; appearing in 'éveiller', 'concierge', 'viendront', 'vierge', and 'pieds'. The candle is established as a phallic symbol and then associated with the writing implement, so there is an implied link between the phallus and the pen. The pen is never explicitly represented but is implied by all these connections; writing never occurs in isolation, but is inseparable from the realities of death, violence, and sexuality. In the *rondels*, Corbière subtly suggests ways

[45] This is borne out by other instances of play upon 'bout de crayon': '— Mon bout de crayon, c'est ma lyre —' ('Un jeune qui s'en va', 7), and 'un bout de plume d'oie' ('Découragеux', 27).

in which all these things are inextricably bound up with one another. The poem is so discontinuous at a propositional level that it forces the reader to seek these oblique connections. The statement that the candle is dead suggests the impossibility of writing and love, as much as it does the literal death of the addressee. The direct reference to the previously unnameable death is chilling, but this is mitigated by its being a quotation from 'Au clair de la lune', which belongs in the childlike register.

The seismic shock of the rejet 'est mort' represents a culmination of the dense patterning of the foregoing text, and the quintil goes on to emphasize emptiness and loneliness by juxtaposing disparate items drawn from the abandoned house topos. They build up a barren *paysage d'âme*, and yet the absence and ethereality have a certain positivity. The lack of a 'concierge' suggests that the realm of death is not a kingdom with an angel at the gateway, but is rather a state which can only be evoked indirectly through images such as the wind and gossamer, which might best be described by Eliot's term 'objective correlative'.[46] The gossamer is left over from the webs of 'Sonnet posthume', which had been spun over the addressee's empty forehead. They had thus already been associated with internal emptiness, but also with hope, and now suggest both insubstantiality and persistence, a combination which amounts to transcendence.

Like many of the *rondels*, this poem brings us back to earth at the end by referring to the coarse bourgeois. Religious imagery is again inverted, since the poet's burial-ground is cursed in the eyes of the 'pieds-plats'. The final return of the refrain has a new variation; the greeting 'good night' marks the end of the evening, whereas the previous two had suggested its beginning, implying that there has been temporal progression. The line nonetheless tails off into uncertainty, for it ends with suspension points and there is no subsequent syntax to anchor the 'bout de cierge'. The suspended candle-end reminds us of all the meaning it has accreted in the course of the poem, and the fact that it marks the end suggests some sort of impotence or failure. Clive Scott points out that 'often refrains have the haunting inexorability of a destiny which must have its way despite the poet's attempt to establish an alternative' and 'Do, l'enfant, do' is the only *rondel* which makes a drama out of this possibility.[47]

[46] T. S. Eliot, *Selected Essays* (London: Faber, 1951), 145.
[47] Clive Scott, *French Verse-Art: A Study* (Cambridge University Press, 1980), 157–8.

'MIRLITON': RENEWAL

Dors d'amour, méchant ferreur de cigales!
Dans le chiendent qui te couvrira
La cigale aussi pour toi chantera,
Joyeuse avec ses petites cymbales.

La rosée aura des pleurs matinales;
Et le muguet blanc fait un joli drap…
Dors d'amour, méchant ferreur de cigales.

Pleureuses en troupeau passeront les rafales…

La Muse camarde ici posera,
Sur ta bouche noire encore elle aura
Ces rimes qui vont aux moelles des pâles…
Dors d'amour, méchant ferreur de cigales.

This *rondel* marks a new departure in a number of ways. It recombines elements of the preceding texts to conjure a pastoral setting which plays on the pathetic fallacy, and is then modulated into another stereotypical scene: the encounter between poet and muse. The poem renews familiar motifs to produce a strong internal development, building to a moment of textual high drama which gives the sequence new impetus.

The pathetic fallacy is reassuringly familiar after the dislocations of 'Do, l'enfant, do', although it is tinged with irony because the speaker describes nature as weeping whilst hardly striking the tone of a mourner. The opening recapitulates the imperative mood from the end of 'Do, l'enfant, do', but in a gentler tone. The monosyllable 'dors', which had been abrupt in 'Do, l'enfant, do', is absorbed into the musical 'dors d'amour' of the new refrain. The phrase is ambiguous because the connection between sleep and love is not spelled out, but the alliteration on [d] and [ʀ] binds them into a strong unit, which is a compressed version of lines 3–4 of 'Sonnet posthume'. The apostrophe 'ferreur de cigales!' is derived from the expression 'ferrer des cigales', meaning to waste one's time doing something useless or absurd. The noun phrase figuratively suggests that the dead poet has an indolent existence, and literally suggests that he can shoe, or pin down, cicadas. Since cicadas are insects, the poet must have great power if he can accomplish this fantastical task. The poem then fully animates the semi-figurative cicada, which becomes a singing creature in line 3. The cicada generates the rest of the quatrain, for line 2 is an adverbial phrase locating it in the

'chiendent' covering the poet. *Chiendent* literally denotes a tenacious weed, and figuratively means an obstacle or trouble. Its significance here is coloured by intratextual resonances: being light vegetation burying the poet, it recalls the *immortelles* in 'Rondel' and hay in 'Sonnet posthume'.

The poet shifts from being the subject in the refrain to being the object of the singing cicada in line 3. The reader is tempted to see the cicada as a metaphor for the poet, for the image of the cicada as singer is not novel. However, although it is placed in two different subject positions, neither coincides with that of the poet.[48] The text stages the poet's struggle in relation to what the cicada represents, for the expression 'ferreur de cigales' implies that the poet is striving to master the cicada, either because he wishes to render its song more dissonant, or because he himself wishes to be as musical as the insect. The juxtaposition of the cicada and cymbals is not unmotivated, because 'cymbalin' is an adjective used to describe sounds reminiscent of the cicada. The cymbals are the product of the *ferreur*'s shoeing activity, as if the verbal play of the first line has summoned up this magical musician.

The tercet continues the playfully precious imagery. Line 5 reworks the commonplaces 'une rosée de larmes' and 'rosée matinale' such that dew is made to cry rather than merely resembling tears. Nature is personified to the point of ridicule, showing that it is a mere conceit to suggest it is crying for the dead poet. The future tense emphasizes that the pathetic fallacy is a predictable trick, rather than something observed afresh as in a Romantic poem. Line 6 attacks the clichéd whiteness of lilies, with the pointed banality of 'joli', but just as the imagery verges on the tawdry, the lily is likened to a 'drap', which reintroduces a more macabre note. Because of the equivalence between bed and grave in the *rondels*, a sheet immediately suggests a shroud. White is the colour of a sheet, and also of the 'poêle' in 'Sonnet posthume' (traditionally white for a child and black for an adult). The overtones of death in 'drap' motivate the return of the refrain, in which sleep now has a more sinister sense.

Line 8 stands out as a lone alexandrine which pays solemn tribute to the poet. The repetition of the [œ] and [z] sounds gives a droning effect, echoing the reference to sleep in the preceding line. The [r] sound of 'pleureuses' recurs in 'troupeau', 'passeront', and 'rafales',

[48] Expectations are similarly subverted in 'Le Poète et la Cigale' (*OC* 703), a parody of La Fontaine's 'La Cigale et la fourmi', in which the singing cicada represents the woman Marcelle rather than the poet.

giving the line great acoustic cohesion. The incongruity of this rolling alexandrine being stranded in a humble context makes for gentle irony. 'Pleureuses' suggests an emotion diametrically opposed to 'Joyeuse', and the contrast between these two words is foregrounded by their morphological identity and identical line-initial positions. Their order of appearance charts a shift from delight to sorrow, as the mood of the poem spirals downwards. The severing of this alexandrine from the quintil visually marks the point at which the 'Rondels pour après' sequence begins to experiment with increasingly free variations on the fixed form of the *rondel*.

The disruption of the form also underscores the major thematic shift which underpins this particular poem; lines 9–12 leave nature, to focus on culture, and are correspondingly darker. The 'Muse camarde' is poised between nature and art, since 'poser' could mean to land like a butterfly or to pose as an artist's model. The noun, 'la camarde', denotes death (because she has no nose), but here it is used as an epithet meaning pug-nosed. This indicates an irreverent attitude towards the muse, yet also establishes a parallel between her and the poet whose nose was broken in 'Sonnet posthume'. Since both the muse and death are feminine allegorical figures, the two are conflated in a single person: the quatrain fuses the themes of death and art, and adds a hint of eroticism with the encounter between muse and poet in lines 10–11.

The emphasis on the mouth eroticizes the transfer of rhymes, particularly as it recalls the 'baiser sous le voile' promised in the sonnet; 'Mirliton' could be read as the materialization of this kiss. The themes of sexuality and poetry coincide in the mouth, and the idea of kissing the muse is not new. Musset's 'Nuit de mai' opens with a request from the muse: 'Poète, prends ton luth et me donne un baiser'. Who will kiss whom is actively debated in the Musset poem, but Corbière's syntax renders the exchange ambiguous. Lines 9–10 literally state that the muse is claiming rhymes from the poet's mouth, yet the metrical structure breaks up the syntax to suggest that she is giving them to him. One is inclined to visualize the muse putting rhymes in the poet's mouth, in conformity with her traditional role. However, the muse is the true recipient of 'ces rimes'; the apparently incidental line 10 explains that she will obtain the rhymes from the poet. Although 'posera' literally means 'will alight' and 'aura' 'will obtain', *poser* more habitually conveys depositing something, so the muse seems to be the subject of both lines yet doing opposite things in them. Lines 9 and 10 are competing with each other to explain the origin of 'ces rimes'. This confusion is similar

to that of the 'baiser sous le voile' passage of 'Sonnet posthume'. Key scenes in the *rondels* resist graphical reconstruction, forcing the reader to consider their sense at a less representational level.

If 'Sonnet posthume' had suggested a marriage of the poet and death beneath the 'poêle', there is here an eroticized encounter between the poet and the muse-death. The 'Rondels pour après' could be read as a poetic manifestation of the figurative expressions 'épouser la camarde' and 'baiser la camarde', meaning to die. This quatrain represents a new configuration of the three central elements already combined in various ways in the *rondels*: love, death, and art. The climactic nature of this can only be appreciated if the *rondels* are read as a sequence. 'Mirliton' juxtaposes two apparently disparate sections in a single short poem, forcing one to read them in relation to each other. The juxtaposition is therefore a source of meaning; it suggests that nature and culture are interlocked in the experience of death. The development of the poem is underlined by the refrain appearing increasingly macabre with each recurrence.

'PETIT MORT POUR RIRE' : LEVITY

Va vite, léger peigneur de comètes!
Les herbes au vent seront tes cheveux;
De ton oeil béant jailliront les feux
Follets, prisonniers dans les pauvres têtes…

Les fleurs de tombeau qu'on nomme Amourettes
Foisonneront plein ton rire terreux…
Et les myosotis, ces fleurs d'oubliettes…

Ne fais pas le lourd : cercueils de poètes
Pour les croque-morts sont de simples jeux,
Boîtes à violon qui sonnent le creux…
Ils te croiront mort — Les bourgeois sont bêtes —
Va vite, léger peigneur de comètes!

After the sombre ending of 'Mirliton', 'Petit mort pour rire' introduces a lighter note. The wit which characterizes the sequence as a whole is explicitly thematized in this poem, which is generated from a series of puns. The title plays on the expression 'petit mot pour rire', in which the apparently harmless 'mot' has been replaced by the loaded term 'mort', by a process which Freud describes as 'condensation

accompanied by slight modification'.[49] The laughter of the dead is a conventional topos (line 6 represents the usual rictus of the death's head), but Corbière folds the humour into the language itself. The physical reality of death is dissolved into a play on words, which is one way of summing up the project of the *rondels* as a whole. Their linguistic medium is continually foregrounded, and wordplay is used not merely to trivialize their message, but as a way of suggesting complexity. As Mitchell indicates, the title means that death is regarded as a slight event without the usual solemnity.[50] However, by associating laughter with death, the juxtaposition also gives laughter a serious function. Wordplay is neither superficial comedy nor a mask for underlying seriousness, but is an integral part of the existential drama. The title 'Petit mort pour rire' thematizes the strategy Corbière uses throughout, akin to Eliot's 'alliance of levity and seriousness (by which the seriousness is intensified)'.[51] Since the four elements of the title have all previously appeared separately in the *rondels*, the ostensibly slight expression draws on the weight of accumulated meaning.

The refrain, 'Va vite, léger peigneur de comètes!', is motivated by a play on the word 'comète', derived from the Greek, which literally means 'star with hair'. Corbière is often praised for this ingenuity, but the play is as much intertextual as etymological; the comparison of comet and hair is a literary commonplace, and the fiery comet brings out the erotic quality of streaming hair.[52] Corbière's comet is personified by being combed, but otherwise retains its cosmic distance, and this by now familiar combination of the domestic and the celestial, of possibility and impossibility, gives the image its fantastic quality. 'Léger' explicitly verbalizes the lightness of the poet, already valorized in 'Rondel'. Lightness functions at various levels: physical weightlessness, verbal levity, and existential optimism. Physical lightness makes possible the poet's flight, and the playful language insists on the importance of not taking life or death too seriously. What has not been noted is that the command 'va vite' is borrowed from the fantastic ballad 'Lenore' by the German Romantic poet Bürger, which was much admired and imitated by French Romantics, and whose themes are echoed in the *rondels*. Its refrain 'Hurrah! die Toten reiten schnell!' was translated by Nerval as

[49] Sigmund Freud, *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious*, trans. James Strachey (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1991), 57.

[50] *Tristan Corbière*, 99. [51] *Selected Essays*, 296.

[52] Cf. Chénier's 'Salut, ô belle nuit' and Cros's 'Scherzo'.

'Hourra! Les morts vont vite…'[53] The poem superimposes death and marriage, as it describes how a dead soldier appears on horseback to claim his bride and carries her off on a frenzied flight towards the nuptial bed which is their tomb. Although 'les morts vont vite' describes the headlong gallop, it has acquired a proverbial sense that the dead are quickly forgotten, and Corbière plays on both connotations.

The quatrain expands the conceit of the refrain, by reworking the topos of the dead human body returning to nature, the emphasis on lightness and abundance suggesting it is a liberation. In the opening line the poet is a comber of comets, but in line 2 his own hair is the subject, transformed into grass and blown in the wind, as if he has become part of the comet's celestial realm. This line not only describes the poet's blending with the natural world at the level of the represented, but the displacement of the hair from object to subject suggests this blurring at the level of representation too. The hair and grass recall the gossamer of 'Do, l'enfant, do', and suggest the persistence of the poet in some essential form. The word order does not reflect the chronological sequence of events, for the grass that he will become syntactically precedes the hair that he has had, blurring the temporality. Lines 3–4 give a more macabre vision of the bodily remains, but the parallel sound patterns on [ɑ̃] and [ɔ̃] around the middle of lines 2 and 3 suggest continuity between the ethereal image and the more earthbound one. The latter also has its intangibility, evoking will-o'-the-wisp bursting out of the eye sockets. Enjambement emphasizes this overflow, and severs the phrase 'feu follets' so its components regain their individual meanings. Mitchell suggests that the fires represent genius and intensity, which shoot out of the poet's head, but remain shut in the heads of ordinary people.[54] 'Pauvres têtes' contrast with the poet's head, which is brimming with imagination. Indeed, the poet has transcended bodily limits, for he is dispersed into nature and communing with comets.

The tercet continues to dissolve the poet into nature, and extends it with a pun on 'Amourettes'. The juxtaposition of flowers and grave

[53] Gottfried August Bürger, *Sämtliche Werke* (Munich: Carl Hanser, 1987), 186; Gérard de Nerval, *Poésies allemandes* [1840] in *Poèmes d'Outre-Rhin*, ed. Jean-Yves Masson (Paris: Grasset, 1996) 133–7. Corbière quotes the famous refrain exactly in 'Le Poète contumace': 'A-t-il donc oublié comme les morts vont vite' (53). Bürger's text is based on a popular ballad, variations of which were sung throughout Europe, including Brittany. Théodore Hersart de la Villemarqué's 1839 collection of Breton songs, *Barzaz Breiz*, includes a version entitled 'Le Frère de lait'.

[54] *Tristan Corbière*, 148.

recalls the 'immortelles' of 'Rondel'. Like the 'immortelles', 'Amourettes' is a term in which several sense-systems coincide. Although they are referred to as if they had a symbolic value explaining why they are laid on the grave ('qu'on nomme' implies a reference to some cultural code), they have no such significance. Technically, *amourettes* refers to grasses (echoing 'chiendent'), but is also a popular term for various flowers including the lily (echoing 'Mirliton'). The word's significance lies in its second meaning: a passing love affair. The paradigms of vegetation and love which run through the *rondels* thus coincide in this word. Love is once again linked with transience, both because an *amourette* denotes an ephemeral attachment and because it is placed in the context of a grave. The refrain is not repeated at the end of the tercet, and, in its place, more flowers are introduced. This loss of the *A* line underlines the ongoing theme of emptiness and continues the dissolution of the *rondel* form initiated in 'Mirliton'. The departure from the pattern is emphasized by the fact that the line resembles an adjunct; it is not technically an independent proposition, beginning with 'et' and lacking a predicate, so the forget-me-nots are adrift in the syntax. Forget-me-nots link flora and love, since they are also known as 'herbes d'amour', but are best known for symbolizing faithful memory. Here, the formula 'fleurs d'oubliettes' playfully inverts this, by referring to forgetfulness. It literally signifies a prisoner's cell, recalling the reference to 'prisonniers' in line 4.[55] Figuratively, 'oubliettes' means any place where things can be secreted, and this is a good description of the memory. The expression 'fleurs d'oubliettes' thus suggests that remembering and forgetting are not mutually exclusive. The parallel between this construction and the 'fleurs de tombeau' indirectly suggests a connection between the tomb and memory, death and the past.

The wordplay of 'Ne fais pas le lourd' launches a more metaphysical evocation of absence in the quintil. It recalls the reference to the feminine visitors of 'Rondel' whose steps 'ne sont pas lourds', implying that the poet may now attain them if he too becomes light. *Lourd* literally means physically heavy, but also serious, ominous, clumsy, stupid, and coarse. The poet is thus urged to be light in all senses: in his physical presence, in his use of language, and in his attitude to metaphysical questions.

[55] The association of imprisonment and nature recalls Hugo's line 'Tous ces sombres cachots qu'on appelle les fleurs', a poetic image generated by the idea that punished souls may be reincarnated as more lowly forms of life, in 'Ce que dit la bouche d'ombre', *Les Contemplations*, *Œuvres poétiques*, ii. 820.

Lourd is not usually used as a noun so it arrests our attention, yet 'ne fais pas le lourd' is thrown in as if it were a ready-made expression. It plays on several colloquial expressions that are meaningful in the context. *Faire le mort* means to pretend to be dead, tying in with the implication in line 11 that he is not really dead. *Faire le sourd* means to pretend to be deaf, feeding the recurrent theme of audibility. Like the title, 'ne fais pas le lourd' uses a verbal trick to make an existential comment.

Much of the wordplay so far has centred on the words that rhyme on [ɛtə] and 'cercueils de poètes' in line 8 is no exception. The phrase consists of almost the same sounds as 'peigneur de comètes', so this is a masterly reinforced rhyme. The sounds of the euphoric expression have been recombined to produce a more sinister one. The vowel sounds are identical and in the same order: [ɛ], [œ], [ə], [ɔ], [ɛ], and [ə]. Five consonants are common to both expressions but in a different order: [p], [ʁ], [d], [k], and [t], and [ɲ] is phonetically close to [nj]. The same set of phonemes is tinkered with to generate both a wonderful entity and a sinister object, suggesting an identity between these apparent opposites, and thus that death is both positive and negative.

Making literal the practical side of the burial ritual generates a further series of jokes in the quintil. Having been described with verbal levity in the title, the poet's corpse is now represented as physically light, for poets' coffins are easy to carry. They are then characterized as 'Boîtes à violon qui sonnent le creux'. *Boîte à violon* is a popular expression for a coffin and 'sonner le creux' means literally to make a hollow sound, and figuratively to lack interest and value, and to be absurd. The line thus brings together two paradigms which run through the *rondels*: sonority (recalling in particular 'Les caveaux sont sourds' from 'Rondel') and *bêtise*. However, line 11, 'Ils te croiront mort — Les bourgeois sont bêtes —', makes clear that the bourgeois are the real fools, implying that they were wrong to think him dead. The lightness of the coffin has been taken to its logical extreme here. At first it was described as light because levity in all its senses was privileged, but the literal interpretation of a light coffin would be that it is empty, and that it did not contain a dead poet. The dismissive tone of 'simples jeux', and suggestion that the poet's death is meaningless, are an expression of the view of those who are burying him. Corbière ironically incorporates their view into the poem, only to undercut it in line 11 by showing that the lightness they see as his absurdity is in fact his strength. For the bourgeois, lightness literally means an empty coffin, whereas for the poet it means fantastic flight. The poet is dead to the bourgeois, yet in reality lives on both

in an afterlife and in his poems. The concluding line brings back the refrain with its euphoric tone, underlining the sense of triumph that life is continuing into death. Lightness may be emptiness, but it is also fullness at another level. The poem threatened to take a sinister turn with the mention of coffins, but ultimately the poet evades the coffin and has the last laugh.

'MALE-FLEURETTE' : FINALITY

Ici reviendra la fleurette blême
Dont les renouveaux sont toujours passés…
Dans les cœurs ouverts, sur les os tassés,
Une folle brise, un beau jour, la sème…

On crache dessus; on l'imite même,
Pour en effrayer les gens très-sensés…
Ici reviendra la fleurette blême.

— Oh! ne craignez pas son humble anathème
Pour vos ventres mûrs, Cucurbitacés!
Elle connaît bien tous ses trépassés!
Et quand elle tue, elle sait qu'on l'aime…
— C'est la male-fleur, la fleur de bohème. —

Ici reviendra la fleurette blême.

The last *rondel* integrates the diverse strands of the 'Rondels pour après' in a forceful assertion that the poet will have the last word. The oxymoronic flower of the title (which plays on Baudelaire's *Fleurs du Mal*) represents the poet's posthumous existence in various ways. The flower as image for the poet is the culmination of a gradual encroachment of vegetation. The first three poems included isolated specimens of flora, whereas 'Mirliton' had a full pastoral setting, and 'Petit mort pour rire' showed the poet metamorphosing into organic material. In 'Male-fleurette' the flower is a metaphor in which the recurring motifs of the sequence all converge. Angelet says that the key to the flower's meaning is its name, which is suppressed in order to give 'une aura suggestive de vague et d'immatériel'.[56] However, the suggestiveness of the flower stems from a plurality of specific connotations, rather than a vague aura. It is a versatile image because, according to cultural conventions, it can

[56] *La Poétique de Tristan Corbière*, 83.

represent a dead person, a poem, a woman, a poetic genius, transience, and immortality.[57] It thus encompasses the major themes of poetry, all of which are woven into the *rondels*. Love and death had already coincided in the *immortelles* and the *Amourettes*, and the 'Male-fleurette' plays a similar role on a grander scale. The flower reintegrates at a metaphorical level the divisions which the previous *rondels* had exposed in the poet. The preceding poems had suggested self-division through the complex rhetorical situation, with its *je/tu* opposition of speaker and child, but 'Male-fleurette' breaks this pattern, being the first poem in the sequence to use the third person. The poet's divisions are now objectified in the flower image, and art is presented as a completed artefact, whereas in the preceding poems it had been a process.

The lexical sense of the refrain is to affirm that the flower will return, and it quite literally returns every six lines when the refrain is repeated. 'Ici' refers to the page itself, such that the flower represents the poem as well as its dead author, playing on the cliché of flowers representing poems. This *rondel* is a version of the 'art outlives the transient artist' topos. The word 'reviendra' contains within itself both past and future, and the quatrain embroils this further, in a particularly knotted example of the temporal uncertainty already observed in preceding *rondels*. The refrain uses the future tense to assert that the flower will return, yet line 2 seems to contradict this by saying that its renewals have already passed. Furthermore, line 2 is oxymoronic when read in isolation. *Renouveaux* are new beginnings, and the parallel between 'reviendra' and 'renouveaux', which occupy identical positions in successive lines, seems to inscribe the possibility of cyclical renewal. However, 'passés' suggests decline and endings, although it is in itself ambiguous. As an adjective, it would mean 'faded', echoing 'blême' in the refrain. As a verb it could mean that the flower is dead, or suggest that the flower's renaissance seems always to have already happened rather than ever being a vibrant fact of the present. These negative implications of 'passés' deny the possibility of novelty, although the refrain and 'renouveaux' assured perpetuity. However, if the syntax is read as running on into line 3, 'passés' may be part of the construction *passés dans*, which would give it a less negative force. The multiple possibilities offered by 'passés' make the syntax of lines 2–4 ambiguous, as it is not clear whether line 3 is going backwards or forwards. If 'passés' is part of a construction only finished

[57] As shown in Philip Knight, *Flower Poetics in Nineteenth-Century France* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986).

in line 3, the open hearts and piles of bones must be its object, whereas if 'passés' had marked the end of a syntactic unit, the hearts and bones must be adverbial phrases which modify the deferred verb 'sème'. In a sense, the two readings amount to the same thing, because either way the flower finds its target, so the doubleness of the syntax underlines the flower's tenacity. The way in which the open hearts and piles of bones are juxtaposed resembles an antithesis, yet, to use Empson's terms, it is not clear in virtue of what they are to be opposed.[58] It suggests that the poet has equal dominion over the realms of life and death, thus blurring this opposition anew.

The tercet shows audience reaction to the fragile flower, reprising the Romantic theme of imagination versus the poverty of real life. The *rondels* systematically oppose poet and bourgeois, and include a lexical group which relates to the social reality of the poet's position ('ours', 'pavé', 'fesse-cahier', 'pieds-plats', 'cigale', 'les bourgeois sont bêtes'). 'Male-fleurette' brings these together and articulates the theme more explicitly. Indeed, it suggests that the mysterious voice from beyond the grave is a histrionic bohemian like the speaker of 'Bohème de chic' or 'Paris', and like those voices, exposes its own artifice. Line 12 explicitly locates the flower in the bohemian milieu, emphasizing that it is a far from pastoral image. However, the self-mockery is complemented by an underlying seriousness; the flower is rooted in the margins rather than standing up as a spokesman for humanity, which reflects the overall tendency of the *rondels* to disguise themselves as ephemeral and inconsequential whilst indirectly exploring fundamental preoccupations of the human condition.

The poem progressively magnifies the force of the flower, so in the quintil it becomes an active troublemaker who violently assaults the bourgeois, caricatural figures defined by their stomachs and labelled 'Cucurbitacés' (a technical term for melons which denotes 'stupid' by analogy). These adversaries are ostensibly being told that they have nothing to fear, but throughout the *rondels* such reassurances serve to insinuate the possibility of danger, and this irony is now directed at the bourgeois rather than at the self. The threat is underlined by the rhyme of 'Cucurbitacés' with 'trépassés', which explicitly verbalizes death, so the curse is revealed to be less anodine than initially suggested. The nominalization of 'trépassés' makes line 9 indeterminate, by refusing

[58] William Empson, *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1930; repr. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1995), 41.

to spell out the connection between the poet and his 'trépassés' with a verb. It suggests that the poet-flower may have killed them, in which case he is no longer merely subject to death but is himself a killer. The interpolation of 'bien' injects a note of naivety, arousing the suspicion that his acquaintance with these dead people may be a euphemism for intimacy. This suspicion is confirmed in line 11, which introduces the theme of love. Love and death have been constantly brought together in the *rondels*, but the links had previously been merely by association, whereas line 11 blatantly lines up 'tue' and 'aime' on the syntagmatic axis. The flower is personified as a *femme fatale* figure in a play on the topos of woman as flower. 'Elle sait qu'on l'aime' is a more forceful version of 'on t'aimera bien' from 'Sonnet posthume'. The reader's appreciation of the poet is described in terms of sexual love. The murderous stance of the flower is vaunted in a tone of levity, as if the flower were aware of itself as an image for the dead poet and playing up to its role by boasting of its deadliness.

The refrain does not return in line 12 as expected, so the reader is given the impression that Corbière's deathly *rondel* has succeeded in extinguishing the *A* as well as the *B* line of the refrain. However, the reader's expectation is belatedly fulfilled, as the refrain is monumentalized in an isolated thirteenth line. In any case, line 12 essentially gives the same content as the refrain, referring to the flower in utter confidence that it cannot dissolve away, unlike so much else in these poems. The assertiveness of the last two lines thus gives a satisfactory sense of closure at the performative level, although there is no facile resolution of the proliferating meaning or the vacillations between positivity and negativity. The refrain is technically a very direct statement, yet it is highly suggestive because so much meaning has accrued around it in the course of the poem. It simultaneously encapsulates the totality of the *rondels*, calls a halt to the circular repetitions, and tells us that the story is not yet over.

The last line is a reprisal of the first, but its future tense is superseded as the flower is literally present on the page of the book. Clive Scott points out that 'Rondels have a habit of turning apparent repetition into real progression. And as they do so, they not only oust the *B* line, but transform the *A* line into a superseded echo, into a call already answered, into an affectionate memory.'[59] Where the refrains of the other *rondels* sounded like posthumous echoes of past naivety when repeated in

[59] *The Poetics of French Verse*, 125.

the last line—each poem having gradually revealed an initial euphoric exclamation to be either illusory or more sinister than it had originally seemed—the refrain of 'Male-fleurette' is superseded in that the reader can see that it has been immortalized in a work of art. The progression in 'Male-fleurette' occurs at the level of the artistic performance, and this is also true of the 'Rondels pour après' as a whole. The sequence does not chart a progression in the sense of resolving the mystery of life and death. Rather, it suggests the possibility of eternal repetitions, and builds up to an affirmation that art can create a pattern out of this endless mutation. At a formal level there is a gradual movement away from fragmented immediacy towards artistic control. This is partly a result of the cumulative effect of the repetitions; the sequence starts by disguising itself as ephemeral and inconsequential, but a pattern gradually emerges, as indirect connections between diverse elements are brought out, such that every one is overdetermined by the end. The final retreat from the cosmic realm to the finite reality of the work of art is a gesture of Romantic irony by a lucid artist pointing out that art is merely a fiction. Nonetheless, signalling the limits of the work of art is a way of transcending them. As in Rimbaud's *Illuminations*, the marvellous flights are glimpsed as transient possibilities, and the concentrated nature of the visions adds to their suggestive power.

The artistic self-awareness which is openly paraded in 'Male-fleurette' had in fact been driving the cycle from the very start. In conclusion, I shall draw together some of the threads which run through the 'Rondels pour après', in order to underline how it functions as a sequence. The simplicity of the *rondels* is carefully engineered and they are linked by a complex pattern of formal echoes and metaphorical links. Their drama is not played out in a linear narrative; although the sequence incorporates key scenes from the drama of death (funeral, decomposition, mourning, afterlife, and posthumous reputation), these are not in a realistic chronological order or causally connected. Shifts in tense seem to mark a forward movement; for instance the progression from 'quand il fera bien noir' in 'Sonnet posthume' to 'il fait noir' in 'Rondel' suggests that darkness has fallen. However, such advances are illusory, for subsequent poems refer to death in the future tense. Death is constantly impending rather than a resting place which is reached. At a metaphorical level, the poems seem to chart the poet's fusion with the universe, but such linearity is overridden by the dominant patterns of circularity and repetition.

Repetition has various effects, a fundamental one being to suggest identity between things that are different, in a fine illustration of Jakobson's principle that 'similarity superimposed on contiguity imparts to poetry its throughgoing symbolic, multiplex, polysemantic essence'.[60] The overall drive of the *rondels* is to establish equivalence between opposites such as life and death, partly through imagery yoking dissimilar things. However, repetition at the level of the non-signifying aspects of language—metre, rhymes, and refrain—plays an important role in this blurring of habitual oppositions. It is a major source of ambiguity, as illustrated by Jean Cohen, who shows that repetition in poetry undermines the parallelism between sound and sense which is the basis of communication.[61] For instance, verse poets introduce metrical breaks at fixed intervals rather than whenever a unit of syntax is concluded, with the result that the sound no longer matches the sense. Rhymes repeat sounds at regular intervals so there is 'ressemblance de sons là où il n'y a pas ressemblance de sens'.[62] For Cohen, prose is essentially linear and verse cyclical,[63] but he says 'le message poétique est à la fois vers et prose. Une partie de ses éléments composants assure le retour, tandis qu'une autre assure la linéarité normale du discours.'[64] However, the *rondels* achieve a dense poetic effect by imposing the principle of circularity on even the most linear elements. As well as repeating sounds and words, the texts constantly recycle commands (notably 'dors'), grammatical constructions (notably the genitives such as 'voleur d'étincelles'), antitheses, images, and themes.

Formal repetitions serve to underline the recycling of themes, many of which in themselves concern recurrence. For instance, the oscillation between anticipating and remembering rhymes is analogous to the represented fluctuations between promise and memory. An effect of repeating thematic elements is to insert them in a variety of contexts. The *rondels* are a complex suggestive system in which certain core elements are recombined in different permutations. These elements are the central topoi of love, death, and art; and elemental oppositions such as light and dark, lightness and heaviness, optimism and pessimism. Instead of expounding on these themes, the texts fragment them, so they appear as a series of alternating flickers. Each element therefore brushes against the others in a variety of circumstances, so

[60] 'Linguistics and Poetics', 370.
[61] Jean Cohen, *Structure du langage poétique* (Paris: Flammarion, 1966).
[62] Ibid. 10. [63] Ibid. [64] Ibid. 100.

the dislocation permits interpenetration of disparate things, and suggests interconnections between them, in contrast to the disjunction of Corbière's other poems. The emphasis is on the shifting relations between things rather than on the things themselves. The poems are able to operate at this allusive level and remain comprehensible because they use poetic commonplaces, such as the association between sleep and death.

Rather than combining elements at a purely abstract level, the texts play on the associations of more particular elements of the natural world, such as flowers. The playful combination of abstract and concrete has more in common with Renaissance poetry than with Romanticism. Corbière also uses the sensuous particularity of things to suggest more intangible notions, in the manner of Eliot's 'objective correlative'. Such techniques bear out Eliot's assertion that Corbière, like Laforgue, has the 'essential quality of transmuting ideas into sensations, of transforming an observation into a state of mind'.[65] The effect of these strategies is that the texts refer to concrete things without allowing them to form a picture. The poems are foregrounded as verbal constructs, and their internal patterns mean that each element is vastly overdetermined, so they are more than mere 'rapprochements arbitraires pour exprimer l'inexprimable'.[66]

However, this necessity is combined with a suggestive indeterminacy, resulting from the pervasive irony of the poems. The self-division enacted in the use of the second person makes for inherent irony, as the speaker ostensibly addresses the poet from a distance and mocks him, yet indirectly exalts him. Ambiguity results from the shifting stance of the speaker, who sometimes retreats so far from the addressee as to adopt the point of view of the bourgeois. The disparity between what is said and the way it is said makes for complexity; sinister messages are veiled as cosy reassurances to suggest an ambivalent view of death. Serious concerns, like death, are treated lightly, but this is a way of expressing them without giving way to emotional outpourings or high-sounding meditation. The ironic alternation between offering and denying is frequently telescoped into a single utterance, the speaker offering love yet showing its impossibility. The poems enact an oscillation between delight and despair, so they avoid falling into either extreme. The formal balance of this oscillation is in itself a source of delight in the poems. Their transcendence stems from this harmony rather than

[65] *Selected Essays*, 290. [66] Angelet, *La Poétique de Tristan Corbière*, 65.

from the offered content, which is why it has an intangible quality. Uncertainty also results from the way temporal uncertainty is built into constructions. The insistence on nouns, suppression of verbs, and use of juxtapositions that do not specify causal links between things, makes it impossible to determine grammatically whether things have happened, will happen, or might happen. When tenses are used, they rarely serve to pin down a singular event. This thematic co-presence of past and future is reflected in the circular movement of the *rondel* form itself.

Such techniques of suggestion produce the effect of an elusive atmosphere. Corbière has found a way of representing sensations without having to pin them to a time or place, so they are simultaneously history, fantasy, and future possibilities. Contradictory elements such as life and death are collapsed on to each other to give a sense of simultaneity. However, this suggestiveness is not mere haziness, but is produced by an accumulation of specific details. Individual images, such as the 'voleur d'étincelles', are startling as units in themselves, bearing out Eliot's point that 'suggestiveness is the aura around a bright clear centre, […] you cannot have the aura alone'.[67] Suggesting possibilities without having to pin them to a time or place is an ideal strategy for representing the afterlife, which is after all the great unknown, simultaneously a prospect of horror and liberation. Corbière reinvigorates the traditional theme of death by locating this uncertainty in the language itself. Describing death in terms of life is a Romantic commonplace, but the novelty of the *rondels* is to suggest this indirectly. Corbière refuses to elevate the eternal poetic themes into abstractions, but rather than deriding them or describing their sordid face as he does elsewhere, he folds their improprieties into the language. Death is presented as a childlike dream, as though the dead poet were still haunted by infantile fantasies. The poems approach fundamental existential preoccupations playfully, suggesting that the major literary themes amount to infantile impulses and sensations. Far from trivializing these things, the emphasis on distinct details underlines their immediacy. The poems suggest the possibility of eternity through formal repetition, rather than explicitly articulating it, for although things are forever dissolving away and never pinned down, they nonetheless return relentlessly, as if the uncertainties of human life are stretched out for all eternity. Transient events become part of a continuing state of affairs, and it is in this final irreducibility of key elements that the poems project the impression of perpetuity.

[67] *Selected Essays*, 300.

The sense of continuity is produced by the continual recurrence of things, rather than anything ever being sustained. The nature of death is suggested indirectly through the series of fragmented utterances, rather than proclaimed by a Hugolian voice aware that it is offering cosmic insights. The poems combine 'vaporisation' and 'centralisation du *Moi*',[68] by suggesting at once cosmic aspirations and the poet's inner life. Their status as a fictional utterance to the dead self means that the poet is at once very close to death and distanced from it. The elliptical 'l'aimé, c'est toujours l'Autre', from 'Sonnet posthume', had suggested that death was alien, and the poems go on to explore the tension between its familiarity and its unfamiliarity, by recombining established motifs in novel ways. The light inconsequentiality of the tone implies that what is being described is habitual, which only emphasizes the novelty.

The poems suggest transcendence, and, as this is an intangible notion, it is appropriate that it should be insinuated, through the lightness of tone, the ethereal images, the sense of indeterminacy, and the formal patterns, rather than presented as something one could locate in time and space, or stated outright as a positive value. It is touched in so lightly that it is barely possible to equate it with death. By addressing a dead poet-child, the *rondels* establish an equivalence between death, poetry, and childhood, and suggest that transcendence is common to all three. They show a state shared by children, poets, and the dead, as much as they represent death in the terms of the other two. The connections are more important than the individual things in themselves, and these diverse aspects of reality coincide in the poet. He is both supremely aware of mortality, as 'Un jeune qui s'en va' pithily points out ('Métier : se rimer finir! | C'est une affaire d'habitude'), and childlike in his fantasy and innocence. The *rondels* reconcile these two characteristics of the poet.

However, the ground covered by the poems is not merely euphoric, but incorporates the negative realities of suffering and loneliness. These are insinuated rather than stridently proclaimed, avoiding both Romantic introspection and the violent self-irony of some of Corbière's other poems. There is constant vacillation between optimism and pessimism, which also frequently coexist at any given moment, so neither ultimately gains the upper hand. The harmony projected by the *rondels* results from the pleasure of the oscillation between alternatives, rather than from happiness ultimately achieved. Nothing is arrived at, but the

[68] Baudelaire, *Œuvres complètes*, i. 676.

meaning of the poems lies in their journey rather than their goal. The violent contradictions which mark Corbière's other work are attenuated in the *rondels*; the to and fro movement between proposing and undercutting has become the rhythmic movement of the child's cradle rocking to the music of a lullaby. This is a poetry of sensations rather than ideas; it makes the unsayable aspects of death, childhood, or poetic vision tangible through an obscure language, rather than offering them as explicit content. The *rondels* represent the culmination of his work as they use all the techniques from his other poems, such as the strong sense of a speaking voice, irony, dislocation, lexical indeterminacy, and wordplay, in the most sophisticated way. However, these are transposed into a different key, and superimposed on the framework of the circular *rondel* form which, as Clive Scott says, 'like all two-rhyme forms, is probably best suited to the presentation of a static, if deepening experience'.[69] Their 'magie suggestive'[70] results from evocative ambiguity rather than from derisive incongruity.

[69] *French Verse-Art*, 158. [70] Baudelaire, *Œuvres complètes*, ii. 598.

Conclusion

This study has traced the increasingly complex ironic techniques used by Corbière. His style is based on vocal multi-layering, which is used variously to build up a kaleidoscopic picture of the world, to expose speakers as comic personae, and to evoke the convolutions of consciousness. Complex rhetorical situations are used to convey self-division, and this aesthetic culminates in the *rondels*. Irony is generated by a wide range of variations on the writer–reader relationship, such as insinuating a distance between author and speaker, or using multiple voices which force the reader to question who is speaking. This is an indirect way of expressing personal experience, since poems play out comic scenes for the benefit of the reader, rather than confiding directly in him or her. Sometimes speakers laugh at themselves in order to exercise lucid control over their suffering, but these shows of *rire jaune* can hardly be described as hilarious, so the reader's laugh is likely to be just as hollow as that of the speaker in the poems, and he or she is made to participate in the ambivalent laughter. However, speakers are often also being parodied by the poem they are apparently uttering, and the reader's uncertainty over whether to laugh at or with the personae is a source of discomfort.

It is the combination of these strategies which makes it so difficult to decide what sort of a book *Les Amours jaunes* is. It can be seen as both a cry of despair and a gleeful liberation, simultaneously destructive and creative. On the one hand, the seemingly infinite regress of ironies risks depriving laughter of its vitality and giving it a negative ring, but on the other hand, when positive and negative judgements cancel each other out and it is difficult to identify the target of irony, its aggressive edge is reduced. When irony is directed at irony itself, it produces effects of absurdity and acts as a release from suffering. In the *rondels* the serious subject of death becomes a childlike game; humour and poetry are both forms of verbal intoxication which unite

the author and reader in laughing at death. *Les Amours jaunes* may dwell on disenchantment and impotence, but these negative themes are expressed in richly multivalent forms. The poetry literally recounts failures in communication, but its irony communicates indirectly at another level. Readings which overemphasize the drive towards silence focus on the literal content, and overlook the way form is used to convey the sensuous particularity of failure and doubt. To dwell on the failure is to take his multifaceted verse too literally. Equally, to accept proclamations within the poetry that it is not art or that its main feat is to debunk Romanticism (when it was hardly the first to do so, and indeed the Romantics themselves initiated the disintegration) is to fall into the trap of taking Corbière at face value. His verse in fact constantly undermines its own assertions, and forces us to think about how the poet wants to be seen. It obliges readers not only to ask who is speaking in the poems, but also to watch themselves in the process of reading and to scrutinize their own practice. By provoking such self-consciousness, Corbière forces the audience to undergo the kind of self-division described in the poetry.

Eliot observed that Corbière's poetry was limited by its focus on personal feelings,[1] but it is this very use of a wilfully idiosyncratic standpoint which serves to defamiliarize a whole spectrum of universal themes. Ideas are dislocated into particular sensations, and significance is displaced into connotations, interjections, and evaluative accents. To deduce general thoughts the reader must grapple with textual details and consider relationships between them. Personality is fragmented across a plurality of different voices rather than being channelled into a unified monologue. Speakers are shown in the process of discovering meanings rather than presenting completed thoughts, or poems at times seem to be discovering meanings through their speakers. This is not to say that the subject vanishes altogether, but rather that it is folded into the language and explored obliquely. Personality is something more intangible than merely the sum of what a speaker can say about himself. The *rondels* could be pinned down as a description of the unconscious or the afterlife, but what their condensed language really conveys is the vast territory that exceeds the unified personality. Irony constantly transcends self-denigration; although posing personae are often reduced to figures of fun, many poems more subtly show subjects to be at the

[1] T. S. Eliot, 'Donne in our Time', in *A Garland for John Donne*, ed. Theodore Spencer (Gloucester, MA: Smith, 1958), 15.

mercy of forces beyond their control, and thus explore the interplay between the inner self and the outer world. Inner and outer worlds also coincide in individual words, as double-voiced utterances bring together disparate languages, with speakers using the discourse of others against themselves or their own against others.

This practice of irony is inextricably linked to its cultural context, and Corbière's poetry registers the individual's response to socio-historical change. For instance, speakers often attack themselves using the terms of society, and then attack society, so the two cancel each other out. Capital is degraded in order to valorize poetry as a repository of spiritual values, but money is simultaneously used to taint art and love, suggesting that nothing is immune to the ravages of capitalism. Irony cuts both ways, so that everything is discredited. This double-edged mechanism evokes the void both internally and externally, and makes it impossible to identify a coherent value system. Corbière even ironizes the ironic discourses of his time, whether the bohemian *blague* or Baudelairian verse. If we step back and consider the book as a product of its time, it looks like an attempt to craft a kind of meta-irony, which simultaneously points out the impossibility of such a project. Indeed, part of Corbière's originality is to have shown that the culture of modernity was so saturated with irony that it was impossible to get outside it, even by retreating to lyric poetry.

The invasion of irony does not of course destroy verse, but rather reinvigorates it, and permits Corbière to free poetry from traditional diction without resorting to free verse or prose. Flaubert escaped the 'pohétique'[2] by writing prose whose artistry would rival that of poetry, but Corbière's flickering use of voice breaks the mould of poetry within verse itself. Baudelaire fused irony with feeling in order to increase the gravity of poetry, rather than merely undercutting it, and Corbière takes this practice to a new level. When he parodies Baudelaire, as in 'La Pipe au poète', he creates a dense texture which insinuates more queasy uncertainties than the original. Corbière's concerns are similar to Baudelaire's, but articulated as staccato tics and spasms rather than monumentalized. Corbière attacks the aesthetic of poetry more comprehensively than his predecessor; he moves further away from ideals of beauty and introduces greater tonal variation, playing more on the ambiguity of intonation in writing. He may be dismissed as a footnote to Baudelaire and forerunner of Laforgue, but he is a crucial link in the 'conversational-ironic' tradition of Symbolism, which is

[2] *Correspondance*, ii. 332.

often overshadowed by the 'serious-aesthetic' tradition represented by Mallarmé. This imbalance needs to be corrected, for late nineteenth-century conversational irony has its own prehistory and a far-reaching legacy in the twentieth century.

The very term irony often gives rise to critical generalities, and it seems at times to engulf all that is literary. In this study I have not attempted to redefine irony, but have pinpointed its workings in a highly particular corpus of verse, in which it permits self-derision, self-protection, and ultimately liberation, all of which regenerate the lyric poem. Irony parodies the coherent Romantic subject, but in the process creates new ludic forms appropriate for the fragmented modern subject. Irony can be used to assert aggressive superiority, and lyricism can be used to assert the centrality of the self, but Corbière's oblique poetry undercuts both kinds of authority.

Appendix: An early draft of 'Veder Napoli poi mori'

This text is transcribed with the permission of the Bibliothèque Municipale de Morlaix. Text of this version is not available in any of the published editions of *Les Amours jaunes*.[1] Corbière's characteristic handwriting comprises numerous underlinings and words written with a marked forwards or backwards slant. These idiosyncrasies are also apparent in the few letters which have survived from his adult years, and are not easily transcribed by conventional typography. I have simply italicized the underlinings.

"Vedere Napoli è morire!"

Italia salve! (Coupons dans l'Italie)
O caisse d'orangers! (Schiller dit: citronniers)
Ah! sur ton sein, l'artiste en tous genres oublie…
De déclarer sa malle. Ah, voici les douaniers!

O Dante, homme aux lauriers, qu'ont-ils fait de ma malle?
Lasciate speranza! Mes cigares, dedans!
O Mignon! Ils ont effeuillé mon linge sale,
Pour le passer au bleu de l'éternel printems!

Ah voici mes amis, les seigneurs lazzarones
Riches d'un doux ventre au soleil,
Des poètes aussi, leurs poux sont leurs couronnes,
Clyso-pompant l'azur qui baille dans leur ciel.

Et leur *far-niente*! … non! c'est encor ma malle,
Non, c'est mon sac-de nuit, qu'à trente, ils ont crevé,
Ils grouillent là-dessus comme poux sur la gale,
Ils ne l'emportent pas, *è pur se muove*!

Ah! ne les dore plus, va, grand soleil splendide!
Las de pales voyous. Ça cherche à se nourrir.
Ce n'est plus le lézard, c'est la sangsue à vide,
. . . . . .

Va, poëte, ne pas voir Naples … et dormir.

[1] A photographic reproduction can be found in Bibliothèque Nationale, *Les Plus Beaux Manuscrits des poètes français* (Paris: Laffont, 1991), 26, but the transcription offered there is of the final version which appeared in *Les Amours jaunes*.

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